

AFC QUARTERLY

THE OFFICIAL MAGAZINE OF THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION

ISSUE 26



**AFC
ASIAN CUP
UAE 2019**

AFC ASIAN CUP UAE 2019

Qatar outshine the
pack to be crowned
kings of Asia

ISSUE
26

April 2019

PLUS **ALMOEZ ALI**

The goalscoring
hero behind Qatar's
remarkable success

SAKI KUMAGAI

Japan captain set to lead her country
into the FIFA Women's World Cup



DANG VAN LAM

The goalkeeper is now reaping the rewards after refusing to give up on his dream of representing Vietnam.



THERDSAK CHAIMAN

Former BEC Tero Sasana player recalls the first-ever AFC Champions League campaign.



STEPH CATLEY

Australia defender looks back on her international career and ahead to the upcoming FIFA Women's World Cup.



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Gallery



Magic Moment

Surrounded by Japan defenders, Almoez Ali spectacularly put Qatar in front in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 final at Abu Dhabi's Zayed Sports City on February 1, before the West Asians secured a 3-1 victory.

Gallery



Beach Boys

Japan were crowned continental champions for the third time after a penalty shootout victory over the United Arab Emirates followed a 2-2 draw in the 2019 AFC Beach Soccer Championship final in Pattaya, Thailand, in March.

Gallery

Historic Day

Al Zawraa's 5-0 win against Al Wasl at Karbala International Stadium in March was the first-ever AFC Champions League match to be hosted in Iraq, as the nation's club teams returned to the competition for the first time in more than a decade.

Gallery



Perfect 10

Hanoi FC's comprehensive 10-0 victory over Cambodia's Naga World in February was the biggest-ever winning margin in the AFC Cup.



Japan Win AFC Beach Soccer Championship

SAMURAI BLUE DEFEATED THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES ON PENALTIES FOLLOWING A 2-2 DRAW IN MARCH’S FINAL IN PATTAYA, THAILAND, AS THE EAST ASIANS CLAIMED THE CONTINENTAL TITLE FOR THE THIRD TIME.

Takaaki Oba scored the winning spot kick as Japan overcame the United Arab Emirates 3-1 on penalties after a 2-2 draw in the AFC Beach Soccer Championship Thailand 2019 final in mid-March. Goals from Masuyuki Komaki and Ozu Moreira gave the East Asians a 2-0 lead but the UAE fought back and a brace from Ali Mohammad ultimately ensured the showpiece event would be decided from the spot. Moreira and Shusei Yamauchi both scored for Japan and, after Haitham Mohamed had converted for the Emiratis, Walid Mohammad missed, allowing Oba to step forward and slam home the winner. The victory meant Japan added to the titles they won in 2009 and 2011 as the

UAE finished runners-up for the second successive tournament. Both finalists, along with third-placed Oman, secured their passage to the 2019 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay. “We knew it was a final, so it would be a very difficult game. All four teams that qualified for the semi-finals, any of them could possibly have been the champions,” said Japan coach Ruy Ramos, who won the AFC Asian Cup with his adopted country in 1992. “But I am glad it was us. I am really pleased. When Oba scored the winning penalty kick, I felt truly happy.” Having won the tournament on home sand in 2007 and 2008, the UAE finished as runners-up to the Islamic Republic of Iran in the 2017 edition. The Emiratis then won all five of their

games en route to the final as both they and Japan sought to become the competition’s first three-time winners. “I would like to thank my players. I’m so proud of them,” said UAE coach Mohammed Almaazmi. “It was a hard game. Japan’s team is very difficult to play against, but I think the luck was not on our side.” Both sides had already secured their place at the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup and they were joined by Oman after they defeated West Asian rivals Palestine on penalties following a 2-2 draw in the third-place play-off. Japan’s Moreira, meanwhile, had further reasons to celebrate after the Brazilian-born 33-year-old was named the tournament’s MVP and also picked up the Top Scorer accolade after netting nine times.



Iraq Hosts First AFC Champions League Game

AL ZAWRAA’S FIXTURE AGAINST AL WASL AT KARBALA INTERNATIONAL STADIUM IN MARCH WAS THE FIRST TIME THE CONTINENT’S PREMIER CLUB COMPETITION HAD SET FOOT INSIDE IRAQ.

History was made in Iraq on March 11 as the first-ever AFC Champions League game to take place in the country saw Al Zawraa defeat the United Arab Emirates’ Al Wasl 5-0 at Karbala International Stadium. Two weeks earlier, Al Zawraa had become the first Iraqi side to appear in the competition since 2008, when both Air Force Club and Arbil competed in the group stage. And the Baghdad team followed up their 0-0 draw against the Islamic Republic of Iran’s Zobahan with a comprehensive 5-0 victory over Al Wasl as the 27,500 spectators inside the stadium enjoyed a match to remember. Al Zawraa will return to Karbala to take on Saudi Arabia’s Al Nassr on April 23 before

hosting Zobahan on May 7 as they aim to qualify for the AFC Champions League knockout rounds for the first time. As the security situation has improved in Iraq in recent years, continental football has gradually started to return to the West Asian country. In 2017, the all-Iraqi clash in the AFC Cup’s West Asia Zonal Semi-final between Al Zawraa and Air Force Club was held in Arbil, while last year both the aforementioned sides staged games in Karbala. The final between Air Force Club and Turkmenistan’s Altyn Asyr, meanwhile, was held in the southern city of Basra, with the Iraqi side claiming their third successive title following a 2-0 victory. International football also made its return to the country in June 2017, with the Lions of Mesopotamia defeating Jordan 1-0 in a

friendly in Basra, before Kenya and Syria also visited Iraq later in the year. In March, the country hosted the three-team International Friendship Championship involving Iraq, Jordan and Syria, with the hosts coming out on top in Basra. Iraq opened with a 1-0 win over Syria after USA-based Justin Meram scored the only goal of the game with 15 minutes to play. The Syrians responded well with veteran playmaker Firas Al Khatib netting late to secure a victory by the same scoreline against Jordan. With all to play for in the final game, goals from Aymer Hussein, Bashar Resan and Mohanad Ali ensured a 3-2 win for Iraq and a memorable tournament victory on home soil.



AFC Women’s Football Day Sets Another Milestone

A RECORD 41 MEMBER ASSOCIATIONS JOINED IN THE ASIAN FOOTBALL CONFEDERATION’S WOMEN’S FOOTBALL DAY CELEBRATIONS IN EARLY MARCH IN SUPPORT OF THE FEMALE GAME ACROSS THE CONTINENT.

The Asian Football Confederation Women’s Football Day, which coincided with International Women’s Day on March 8, proved a huge success once more as 41 Member Associations (MAs) showed their support for the women’s game on the continent. MAs from countries including Korea Republic, China PR, India and newcomers Australia, Bahrain and Brunei Darussalam organised festivals, tournaments, workshops, skills clinics and seminars, with the number of participating countries up 11 from last year’s 30. More than 22,000 people, comprising children, adults, women’s national team players, football ambassadors, role models and coaches joined the annual continent-

wide celebration dedicated to promote and develop women’s football. Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, the AFC President, welcomed the strong support for the AFC Women’s Football Day. “The AFC is proud to be the only Confederation in the world to celebrate women’s football and it is fantastic to see so many of our Member Associations join hands to acknowledge and appreciate the women who have dedicated their time and knowledge in football,” he said. “Last year, the AFC launched the ‘It’s My Game’ campaign, acknowledging the work put in by women in the workforce for the benefit of the sport. It is our pledge to continue recognising the wonderful achievements by women who work tirelessly both on the pitch and behind the scenes. “Women in Asia have enjoyed huge

success and, today, we pay tribute to all women, whose significant contributions have gone a long way in promoting and developing our great sport.” The 2019 AFC Women’s Football Day heralded an important year for women’s competition as Australia, China PR, Japan, Korea Republic and Thailand represent the continent at the FIFA Women’s World Cup France in June. The future stars of women’s football will also feature in the AFC U-16 Women’s Championship and AFC U-19 Women’s Championship in September and November respectively – both held in Thailand. The AFC has long since boasted some of the strongest women’s teams in the world, with Japan winning the FIFA Women’s World Cup in 2011.



India To Host 2020 FIFA U-17 Women’s World Cup

AFTER SUCCESSFULLY STAGING THE 2017 FIFA U-17 WORLD CUP, THE SOUTH ASIAN COUNTRY HAS BEEN SELECTED TO HOST ITS SECOND GLOBAL SHOWPIECE, WITH THE WOMEN’S U-17 CAST TO ARRIVE NEXT YEAR.

India will host the 2020 FIFA U-17 Women’s World Cup, the FIFA President Gianni Infantino announced in mid-March, as the country seeks to follow up the success of staging the men’s edition of the tournament in 2017. The World Cup in 2017 was the first FIFA global showpiece to be staged in India and was widely attended, with crowds in excess of 50,000 turning out to watch the host nation in New Delhi before they exited at the group stage. But football fever also gripped the country elsewhere, as attendances regularly topped 50,000 in Kolkata – including more than 66,000 for the final between England and Spain – and Mumbai and Kochi also drew in huge crowds. “We are thankful to FIFA for giving us the right to host the U-17 Women’s World

Cup. This will raise the profile of women’s football in the country,” said All India Football Federation General Secretary Kushal Das. “We have been giving a lot of emphasis on the development of women’s football in the country. So we bid for the U-17 Women’s World Cup and now we have got it.” As host country, India automatically qualify for the 16-team showpiece event. The U-17 women’s tournament began in 2008, when DPR Korea were crowned inaugural champions in New Zealand. Korea Republic ensured the title stayed in Asia two years later after defeating Japan on penalties in the Trinidad and Tobago-hosted tournament. Other Asian successes include Japan in 2014 and DPR Korea in 2016, while Spain are the reigning champions after defeating Mexico in the final in Uruguay in 2018. The

tournament in India will be the seventh edition. September’s 2019 AFC U-16 Women’s Championship in Thailand will serve as the Asian qualifiers, with the two finalists joining India in what will be their maiden appearance in the competition. The final round of qualifiers for the continental competition took place between February 27 and March 7, with Australia, China, Bangladesh and Vietnam all securing their places. As the top three teams at the 2017 AFC U-16 Women’s Championship, DPR Korea, Japan and Korea Republic had all already been guaranteed qualification to the 2019 edition. India, meanwhile, failed to make the cut having been eliminated in an earlier round of the qualifying campaign.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

WHEN SAKI KUMAGAI MADE HISTORY WITH HER MATCH-WINNING PENALTY AT THE 2011 FIFA WOMEN'S WORLD CUP FINAL SHE WAS ONE OF THE YOUNGEST IN THE JAPAN SQUAD. NOW, AHEAD OF THE 2019 EDITION IN FRANCE, SHE WILL BE ONE OF THE MOST SENIOR, THE MOST DECORATED, AND WEARING THE CAPTAIN'S ARMBAND. HAVING DOMINATED THE CLUB SCENE WITH HER OLYMPIQUE LYONNAIS FEMININ SIDE, THE 28-YEAR-OLD WILL LOOK TO CONTINUE THAT GALLIC SUCCESS ON THE INTERNATIONAL STAGE. KUMAGAI SPEAKS EXCLUSIVELY TO AFC QUARTERLY ON HER CAREER SO FAR, THE NADESHIKO'S PREPARATION FOR JUNE'S SHOWPIECE EVENT AND HER NEW ROLE AS MENTOR TO JAPAN'S YOUTHFUL SIDE.





The FIFA Women's World Cup obviously is a special tournament for you, with your winning penalty in the 2011 final making you a household name. What does it feel like to be a World Cup winner?

Of course, I still think about it to this day. Stepping up onto the podium with all the confetti showering down, it's a moment I don't think I can forget for the rest of my life even if I tried. And remembering that day motivates me. It makes me want to get back to the podium, so I can enjoy the view from the top again.

It also helped pave your way to a move from Urawa Reds to Europe, first to FFC Frankfurt and then Olympique Lyonnais Feminin. Was it a difficult decision to make?

I moved after the World Cup, but I had signed before the tournament started so no, it wasn't a difficult decision for me at all. If anything, I was excited about the move because I really wanted to see how I compared against the best players overseas. I definitely had more excitement than fear about going abroad.

How did the transfer help you develop as a person, as a player?

I like to think I've matured as a player by competing every day at a high level at

Lyon. I've had to push myself on a daily basis and figure out how to survive in such a competitive environment. I think I've grown as a person, too, because I've had to adjust to life here which is different in so many ways compared to Japan. I have had a lot of help in getting by and I owe so much to so many people.

Above all, I've experienced so many things that I would never have experienced in Japan and that's forced me to learn how to adjust.

Nothing came easy to me, but I expected that from the start. I knew I just had to go out and do it. It probably wasn't as tough of an adjustment as people think because I knew what I was going to be up against. The one thing I do miss, though, is all the delicious Japanese food!

Lyon are arguably the best women's club in the world right now. What have you learned from your time there?

It's really about trial and error on a daily basis. I make mistakes every day and learn from them, apply what I learn from one day to the next, so I can stay competitive. I'd say the most important thing I tell myself is to know what your strengths are. To succeed, one needs to know what his or her strengths are.

And this year's FIFA Women's World Cup will be played in France, with the final

in Lyon where you've spent the last six years. What does that mean to you?

It means a lot, certainly a lot more than if this tournament was being held in a country I knew nothing about. I know France is putting a lot of time and effort into this.

And, yes, it gives me great joy that the semi-final and final will be played at our stadium in Lyon – and it does motivate me to advance far enough in the tournament, so we can play at the stadium. The thought of being able to win the title in Lyon is certainly a motivating factor.

The build-up to the tournament has seen some mixed results. Earlier this year, at the SheBelieves Cup, Japan drew away to the US, beat Brazil but lost 3-0 to England, who will be in your group in France.

I couldn't play in the second and third games because of the flu but considering how many players we tested and tried, I thought we were able to play to our strengths pretty well. The US weren't in tip-top form, but we came from behind twice to pull out a draw. We had some late chances so it's a little disappointing we couldn't win it, but I think it means a lot that we didn't lose to a team like the US. It's difficult to read too much into the match but it was

good simulation for us looking ahead to the Women's World Cup.

At this stage in the run-up to the tournament, it's probably better to find out what your weaknesses are rather than being reminded of your strengths. It goes without saying that there isn't a game we should be allowed to lose but it's good to know at this point what areas of the game you need to work on. And it's also good that some of us were able to get a first-hand feel for England about how good they are.

Japan failed to qualify for the Rio Olympics. Passing on the torch is never an easy task, be it the national team or club team. How have the younger players been since failing to qualify for Rio?

There's no question our team has got a lot younger. But on the flip side, the younger players are fearless and have shown that in the three games we played in the US. I think they've given our team a positive jolt. We need them as well as the experience the veteran players can bring. It remains to be seen who the final 23 will be, but I think we've gelled well so far.

As one of those veterans in the squad, and captain, what advice have you given the younger players on the team?

Left
2011 FIFA World Cup

Above & Below
AFC Women's Asian
Cup Jordan 2018



I don't really advise someone based on their age. It doesn't matter to me whether a player is young or a veteran. The one thing I do tell anyone is to be aggressive – to go all in on anything. I do try to offer words of encouragement when and where I can, but I also get the feeling the younger players aren't all that nervous or uptight about playing at the Women's World Cup.

This will be your third FIFA Women's

World Cup but this time you are likely to be there as skipper, following in the footsteps of Nadeshiko legends Homare Sawa and Aya Miyama. Are you feeling any added pressure in this new role?

I don't feel pressure at all, to be honest. I'm fully aware I could be captain, which would certainly be different to the position I was in for 2011 and 2015. But I'm not going to do anything differently; I'd do what I have to do regardless of my age or stature on the team. I'd pass on my experiences or what I know whether I'm captain or not. So, no, I won't be feeling any extra pressure going into the tournament as captain. It's not like I'll suddenly start playing better just because I've been given the armband. I always try to lead by example whether I'm captain or not.

Has the coach asked you to do anything in particular as captain of the team?

She has asked me to look after the team as a whole but that's a given if you're in that position. I'll just try to be the bridge between the manager and the coaching staff and the players. She does ask me what the players are thinking and feeling, so those are some of the things I try to relay to her on a constant basis.



You faced the United States in the last two Women's World Cup finals. While the US have stayed the course as the world's top-ranked team, Japan have had their ups and downs since 2015. Are Japan ready to go toe-to-toe with the US again?

Well for me personally, I don't think we were ever on the same footing as them. We managed to win it in 2011 but the US have always been the team to beat for us and that hasn't changed. Their strengths

Left AFC Women's Asian Cup Jordan 2018

Above & Below Left With Olympique Lyonnais Feminin

and our strengths differ but I think if we can get the most out of our players, we are capable of giving them a good game. We know the pain of losing to them in the final, and they know what it feels like to lose to us. They will probably be a team that we will have to get by sooner or later if we want to win the championship but at the same time, there are a lot of other teams we will have to beat in order to win the title.

Do you feel like you represent all of Asia and not just Japan? As Asian champions, should Japan feel compelled to do well in France?

It's difficult to say. I think the first sense of duty would have to be to Japan, then Asia. Obviously, I want to do well for Japan so that it boosts the rest of the continent, but I don't think it should be all on Japan to raise the women's game in Asia. But yes, if Japan do well at the World Cup then it will benefit the rest of Asia, so we do have a responsibility in that sense.

This FIFA Women's World Cup is particularly important to Japan as it leads to the 2020 Olympics. What does 2020

mean to you, a Summer Olympics held in your home country?

The Women's World Cup is important which goes without saying, but so is the Olympics. The entire world will be watching, and I want to perform well there for sure. It's an opportunity for us Japanese to show the rest of the world how well we can play the game. And to have that opportunity on home soil, in front of your own fans – it doesn't get much better than this.





Qatar Crowned Continental Champions

THE 17TH EDITION OF THE AFC ASIAN CUP SAW A RECORD 24 TEAMS COMPETE FOR THE RIGHT TO BECOME KINGS OF ASIA IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES, WHERE QATAR SWEEPED ALL CHALLENGERS ASIDE TO WIN THE TITLE FOR THE FIRST TIME.



As captain Hasan Al Haydos hoisted the sparkling new AFC Asian Cup trophy into the Abu Dhabi sky, there could be little doubt that Qatar were deserved winners; the West Asians having won all seven of their games and conceded just once in a run that stunned the continent. Some of the more established elite shone, if only in stages, but Felix Sanchez's men were the only side that peaked and then maintained that level over the course of the tournament as the likes of Saudi Arabia, Korea Republic and Japan were all beaten by the Maroons.

The AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 was the

biggest ever, with 23 nations joining hosts the United Arab Emirates, and where the cities of Abu Dhabi, Al Ain, Dubai and Sharjah offered up world class venues and state-of-the-art facilities. Almoez Ali's stunning bicycle kick opened the scoring against Japan in the final at Zayed Sports City, before Abdulaziz Hatem curled home a wonderful second. Although Japan did manage to pull one back, Akram Afif's penalty sealed the title in the final 10 minutes as Qatar claimed the sweetest of victories.

While many had tipped the tiny Gulf nation for a place in the last four, few, if any, non-Qataris – Spanish legend Xavi Hernandez aside – believed they could win the competition. But this was a victory born in the famed Aspire Academy – from where the likes of Ali and Afif are esteemed graduates – and engineered by the superb Sanchez, the Spaniard who had previously guided many of the same players to AFC U-19 Championship glory in 2014. Ali's goal in the final took the Al Duhail striker's tally to nine, breaking Iranian legend Ali Daei's eight-goal haul in 1996, while Afif registered an incredible 10 assists across the tournament. Both players had starred for Qatar during the U-19 success just over four years earlier. "Today we made history, we made history for our country, so we need to be proud of



our achievement," said Sanchez, who took charge of the senior national side in June 2017. "This is one step more to continue developing the team to play in another tournament [the 2019 Copa America] in the summer and to be ready in 2022 to represent Qatar. "We played against a top-quality team, not in Asia but the world, so a result in a game like this is huge for us." Sanchez's reference to Japan's world status carried weight, after the Samurai Blue reached the last 16 of the FIFA World Cup Russia 2018 seven months earlier and gave Belgium an almighty scare. Defending champions Australia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Korea Republic and Saudi Arabia had also appeared at the global showpiece, but it was the 2022 FIFA World Cup hosts who outshone the rest. Successive wins over Lebanon and DPR Korea in the group stage were to be expected, although Ali's four-goal haul against the latter was proof the 22-year-old meant business. The first continental giant to stand in front of the Maroons were the Saudis, and Ali's brace was enough to seal top spot in Group E and a date with Iraq in the Round of 16. Basham Al Rawi scored the only goal of the game with an expertly executed free-kick and suddenly Qatar – yet to concede – found themselves in the quarter-finals for





just the third time.

Korea Republic – themselves boasting a 100 percent record but yet to peak – awaited but were unable to halt the Qatari momentum as Hatem drilled home the winner with 12 minutes to play. Anyone who doubted Sanchez’s side’s title credentials is now beginning to think twice.

It was an all Gulf nation clash in the semi-finals after the UAE eliminated Australia to maintain hopes of repeating their 1996 feat and reaching the final on home soil.

But the Emiratis were outclassed at Mohammed bin Zayed Stadium as first-half goals from Boualem Khoukhi and Ali were added to by late strikes from Al Haydos and Hamid Ismail in a 4-0 win.

With 16 goals scored and none conceded in the lead-up to the final, the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 would have been a resounding success for Qatar regardless of what happened against Japan. The performance and result that followed only enhanced their reputation further.

Ali’s juggling act and ensuing bicycle kick stunned the four-time winners in the 12th minute before Hatem made it two as the 30-minute mark approached.

Japan threatened and Takumi Minamino gave them hope with just over 20 minutes to play. But after Maya Yoshida was adjudged to have handled, Afif was assured as he confidently dispatched the penalty. Less than 10 minutes later, Qatar were crowned



the ninth champions of Asia.

So many of the young squad had stood out in the month-long football bonanza – Saad Al Sheeb was named the tournament’s best goalkeeper, the 2018 AFC Player of the Year Abdelkarim Hassan was at his swashbuckling best down the left flank,

and Al Rawi was a commanding presence in defence.

Elsewhere, Hatem was superb in midfield, Al Haydos classy throughout and Afif dazzled as he showed why he has been touted as one of Asia’s hottest talents for many a year. Ali, though, was the star of the tournament as he picked up both the MVP and Top Scorer accolades.

“I expected to score goals, but I didn’t think I’d score nine, I was expecting three or four,” said Ali. “I would have been embarrassed as a striker if I didn’t score.”

While Qatar can now look forward to testing their wits against the best of South America in the summer as they continue to build for the 2022 FIFA World Cup, the 23 other sides will look back with contrasting emotions.

As ever, Japan had entered as one of the tournament favourites, but coach Hajime Moriyasu omitted some of his more experienced players as the Samurai Blue sought to bring through a younger generation.

Hard-fought wins in the group stage were proof of a winning mentality and successive 1-0 victories over Saudi Arabia and Vietnam in the knockout rounds secured a return to



the semi-finals, but this was far from vintage Japan.

Indeed, arguably the only time they truly hit the heights expected was in the semi-finals when a ruthless second-half display disposed of Iran 3-0.

Many people’s tip before the tournament, Iran had impressed against Spain and Portugal at the FIFA World Cup and, in what proved to be long-serving coach Carlos Queiroz’s last stand, were desperate to end their 33-year wait for the trophy.

Striker Sardar Azmoun shone in the early rounds and, despite being unable to break down a stubborn Iraq in the group stage, the three-time champions progressed to the semi-finals looking like strong contenders.

But, like so often in the past, Team Melli were unable to produce when it mattered most and exited without truly troubling the Japanese.

Korea Republic’s win over Germany at the FIFA World Cup and subsequent good results under coach Paulo Bento ensured they went into the competition with plenty of hope, particularly given the form of their star man, Son Heung-min.

But they struggled to see off a resolute Bahrain in the last 16, needing extra-time to claim a 2-1 win, and their bid to add to the titles won in 1956 and 1960 will go on for at least another four years after defeat to Qatar.

Australia’s opening-day loss to Jordan was a sign that they too were not at their best. Subsequent wins over Palestine and Syria saw the Socceroos into the last 16, where they needed penalties to see off Uzbekistan.

They fell to the hosts in the quarter-finals, though, and Graham Arnold will look for improvement in the months ahead. In Awer Mabil, however, they do appear to have a major talent on their hands after he netted

twice in the group stage.

Without their injured talisman Omar Abdulrahman, the hosts performed well to reach the semi-finals after they topped their group and later ousted the defending champions, but the capitulation against Qatar shows there is plenty work to be done following the departure of Alberto Zaccheroni.

Saudi Arabia flattered to deceive, beating both DPR Korea and Lebanon, but failing to find the net in defeats to Qatar and Japan



Asians Uzbekistan were unlucky to go out on penalties to Australia at the same stage. Turkmenistan’s best moment came in a narrow 3-2 defeat to Japan.

Bahrain, Jordan and Oman did well to reach the Round of 16, while Palestine picked up their first-ever points in the competition following draws with Jordan and Syria, who were unable to hit the heights of their FIFA World Cup qualifying campaign.

An improving Iraq were perhaps unlucky to run into Qatar in the last 16 as they were

unable to match their semi-final appearance from four years earlier, while Lebanon’s misfortune was even greater as they missed out on a place in the knockout rounds by virtue of an inferior disciplinary record to Vietnam.

There was heartbreak also for India, who, despite a stunning 4-1 win over Thailand in their opening match, were eliminated after conceding a stoppage-time penalty to Bahrain to allow the West Asians to advance in their place.

China will look to build on a second successive

quarter-final appearance, but will have been disappointed with their three-goal losing margin against Iran. DPR Korea and Yemen, meanwhile, found the going tough against Asia’s elite and will aim to come back stronger in four years’ time.

The AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 was themed ‘Bringing Asia Together’ and, with 24 teams from across the continent, it did exactly that.

In years to come, it will likely be remembered for its one truly outstanding team: Qatar, who began the tournament as outsiders and ended it on the podium, deservedly holding the AFC Asian Cup aloft.



RECORD-BREAKER

AFTER FINISHING AS THE TOP SCORER AT THE AFC U23 CHAMPIONSHIP CHINA 2018, QATAR STRIKER ALMOEZ ALI INSPIRED HIS NATION TO GLORY AT THE AFC ASIAN CUP UAE 2019, NETTING A SPECTACULAR GOAL IN THE 3-1 WIN OVER JAPAN IN THE FINAL AND BREAKING ALI DAEI'S SCORING RECORD.

By: Ahmed Hashim Photos: Lagardère Sports

The bicycle kick is truly one of the greatest sights in football. Sometimes it happens when you least expect it, making it all the more special. The manoeuvre is said to have been first performed on the global stage by Brazil's Leônidas da Silva, a man known as the Black Diamond, who stunned onlookers by using the kick at the 1938 FIFA World Cup. Eighty-one years later, a man who likes to be called the Black Panther did the same at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 final at Zayed Sports City in Abu Dhabi.

In retrospect, Almoez Ali's bicycle kick to open the scoring against Japan in Asian football's showpiece event gets better every time you think of it. The 22-year-old Qatari forward conjured up the effort with his back to Maya Yoshida, one of Asia's most distinguished defenders, juggling the ball twice before acrobatically lashing it past a stunned Shuichi Gonda in the Japan goal. That goal meant Ali's name would be written into the AFC Asian Cup history books as it broke Ali Daei's long-standing record for most goals scored at a single tournament. The Iranian great set the record in the same stadium when he equalised against Kuwait in





the 1996 third-place play-off, the year of Ali’s birth.

Qatar went on to win 3-1 and be crowned continental champions for the first time while, in addition to the Top Scorer award, Ali was also named as the tournament’s MVP.

Ali’s story began in Sudan, where he was born, but he took his first steps in football in Mesaimeer, a dusty suburb on the outskirts of Doha. His family moved there when he was a child and, for Ali, his early interest in the beautiful game would soon grow into much more.

Haidar Hassan, a youth team coach at second division side Mesaimeer SC, spotted Ali’s talent and helped him to join their age group system. Hassan had an instrumental role in Ali’s progression, guiding him along the way and cultivating his ambition to play for Qatar.

“Mesaimeer put the seeds of ambition in me,” recalled Ali, while speaking to the media during a recent visit to the club. “I wanted to work hard and reach the Qatar national team; this was a burning desire inside me when I was playing for Mesaimeer. They brought me to the spotlight and I am very grateful to the club and all the players, staff and officials for all that they did for me.”

Ali’s dream would come to fruition through the prestigious Aspire Academy. Scouts

signed him after watching a youth league game between Mesaimeer and El Jaish and it wasn’t long before he was called up to the Qatar U-19 squad.

The move to Aspire did not just accelerate Ali’s ambition to play for Qatar, it also helped him earn a footballing education abroad. When offered a chance to play at one of the Aspire-owned clubs in Europe, Ali chose to go to LASK Linz as a number of his friends were already there.

That meant Ali’s senior footballing debut would start, not in Qatar, but on the banks of the River Danube in Austria. He played seven times and scored one goal during his time in Linz. Midway through the season, he moved to CyD Leonesa in the Spanish third tier, another Aspire-owned club. There, he created history by becoming the first Qatari player to score in a Spanish league.

But playing time was still hard to come by, and Ali returned to Doha after just six months in Spain. While it was short, his stint in Europe made him a better player and he was deemed ready to join the first team squad at four-time Qatari champions Lekhwiya.

At first, Ali struggled to break through due to a star-studded squad featuring the likes of Youssef El Arabi, Nam Tae-hee and Youssef Msakni in forward roles. But Ali would still keep punching above his weight and trying to make

his mark, even when he was played on the wing – which the whole continent would later discover was not his best position.

By the 2017-18 season, Lekhwiya had turned into Al Duhail and Ali had become a regular on the team sheet. It would be a historic season for both club and player – Al Duhail won the league undefeated and lifted both domestic cups, while Ali was named as the U-23 Player of the Year for the second season in a row.

While he was beginning to earn his name in club colours, Ali had also become a fixture wearing the maroon of Qatar’s national team. Like many of his teammates, the Aspire Academy laid the foundations for his progression through the national youth set-up. Qatar’s age group teams had begun to be fully composed of Aspire graduates. In Ali’s case, his batch would soon attain the golden generation label.

That label was first touted when an impressive Qatari team won the 2014 AFC U-19 Championship in Myanmar, with Ali scoring thrice. It was followed by a fourth-place finish at the 2016 AFC U23 Championship at home, which saw Qatar narrowly miss a ticket to the Rio Olympics following defeat to Iraq in the third-place play-off. Ali scored only once but played in all but one of Qatar’s games in a tournament that

saw him go head-to-head with some of Asia’s rising stars.

Two years later, Ali and Qatar returned to the same competition with title ambitions. The 2018 edition in China again saw Qatar go all the way to the semi-finals but they came up short once more, losing to Vietnam on penalties before going on to finish third. For Ali, however, it would be a tournament to remember, after he scored six times to pick up the Top Scorer award.

And then came the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019. Qatar coach Felix Sanchez knew Ali well due to their time together with the U-19 and U-23 squads. The Spaniard continued to maintain his confidence in the forward when he landed the senior team job.

Going into the tournament, Ali himself had not anticipated having the impact that he did. “I expected to score goals, but I didn’t think I would score nine, I was expecting three or four. Thankfully the team helped me score many times,” he reflected.

Looking back to Qatar’s first game against Lebanon, it is interesting to recollect how frustrated Ali was when he initially found the going tough. Eventually, he scored, tapping in the rebound from close range after Abdelaziz Hatem’s effort was saved. The goal gave Qatar a 2-0 lead and breathing space, and Ali let out a scream in relief when the ball hit

Far Left
AFC U23 Championship China 2018

Left
2018 AFC Champions League

Above
AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019

the net.

“We understood that the smaller teams could beat the bigger teams, so we analysed the Lebanon team and we beat them, and eventually we managed to reach our target,” said Ali.

While he had netted his first goal, it was only the beginning. DPR Korea followed next and, this time, Ali scored at ease, bagging four goals in a 6-0 win as he moved to the top of the scoring charts. By now, it was looking like he could win the Top Scorer accolade, just a year after doing the same at the AFC U23 Championship.

The scoring continued in the final group game against Saudi Arabia, as Ali netted both goals in a 2-0 win for Qatar that saw them go through to the knockout stage as group winners. It was a stunning individual performance; Ali had also won a penalty which was missed by Hasan Al Haydos before having another effort disallowed as Qatar proved too much for the three-time Asian champions.

With seven goals to his name, Ali had

become the player to watch out for in the Qatar line-up. As his profile grew, defenders made life harder for him. Ali failed to add to his tally against Iraq in the Round of 16 and then Korea Republic in the quarter-finals, although Qatar edged through 1-0 on each occasion.

However, normal service was resumed soon after. The semi-final against hosts UAE witnessed a sublime finish from Ali, as he curled in the second of Qatar’s four goals to return to scoring form. It was a special strike, his eighth of the competition, tying him with Daei’s record – although, he argued, records were not on his mind.

“I wasn’t thinking about equaling Ali Daei’s record,” he insisted. “No, I just left it to fate, and thankfully I managed to score a goal and bring joy to my parents, the Qatari people and my teammates.”

“Of course, I was really happy with the goal. It was a beautiful strike, but it means nothing, because our objectives are bigger than just scoring a beautiful goal. I have to keep my head down and work so I can reach my objectives.”

Qatar too needed their star striker to keep his head down for their next game – the AFC Asian Cup final against Japan – the biggest in their history. Thankfully for them, he delivered there as well, beating Daei’s record



and mimicking Leônidas with his acrobatic strike. The Black Panther had joined the Black Diamond's club.

As Qatar celebrated their first-ever AFC Asian Cup win, Ali was crowned both Most Valuable Player and Top Scorer – a feat achieved by only Jia Xiuquan and Younis Mahmoud in the history of the tournament. The two players, however, only finished joint-top scorers on three and four goals respectively.

Back in Doha, the Qatari players were welcomed home as heroes and understandably Ali was at the heart of all celebrations. He was invited to parties everywhere, posing patiently for photos and cutting a seemingly endless series of celebratory cakes.

Yet, one such cake must have been a little more special than the rest. His old friends at Mesaimeer SC invited him to visit their facility again – the place where it began all those years ago. Haidar Hassan was still there, beaming, almost two decades after first discovering his talent. He had sent Ali a message after his continental exploits, saying: “This is the level I hoped you’d reach.”

Ali was keen to place on record how much it all meant to him. “It means a lot to be honoured by the club. Mesaimeer is my home and if not for this club, I wouldn’t be here,” he said.

Ali
AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019

“All that I have done in my career goes back to the coach, Haidar Hassan, who discovered my talent and brought me to the club, and then all the other coaches who helped me from then on.”

Ali has shown his true capabilities now, in what has been an incredible journey. He is now a household name, with his record-breaking feats, acrobatic strikes and, last but not least, the violin celebration after scoring. The question now is: can he keep making defenders dance to his tune?

Among the admirers he gained at the AFC Asian Cup was Jose Mourinho, who praised his talent and predicted a great future for him if he was to try his luck abroad again. Coincidentally, Ali is now playing under new Al Duhail coach Rui Faria, a long-time assistant of Mourinho.

The striker’s next task will be to inspire his club to continental glory and they too will have lofty ambitions after exiting at the AFC Champions League quarter-finals stage in 2018.

Whatever happens, fans in Asia and beyond will be watching on with a keen interest in the kid from Mesaimeer who shot to stardom in early 2019.



ON THE RISE

A KEY MEMBER OF A TEAM WHICH HAS RISEN UP THE RANKINGS IN RECENT YEARS, STEPH CATLEY IS CONFIDENT THE MATILDAS CAN ACHIEVE BIG THINGS AS THEY LOOK TO BUILD ON RECENT MOMENTUM AHEAD OF THE FIFA WOMEN’S WORLD CUP IN FRANCE IN JUNE.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Lagardère Sports/Getty Images

As the FIFA Women’s World Cup France 2019 rapidly approaches, it’s fair to say the female game has never enjoyed the spotlight so much.

A recent match in Spain between Atletico Madrid and Barcelona’s women’s teams drew in more than 60,000 fans, while just short of 40,000 turned out to watch the female sides of Juventus and Fiorentina in Italy in March.

FIFA recently announced that the group stage game between France and Nigeria in Rennes is already sold out, with everything

pointing to a growing appetite for women’s football ahead of the global showpiece.

After a hugely impressive couple of years, Australia will start the competition among a sizeable group of teams who believe they have what it takes to be crowned world champions.

Preparation is going well, with the Matildas winning three from three against New Zealand, Korea Republic and Argentina to lift the 2019 Cup of Nations on home soil in March, before they ran the USA close in an entertaining 5-3 defeat in early April.

A key component in the side’s rise to sixth in the FIFA World Rankings – as of the beginning of April – has been Steph Catley, the 25-year-





old defender who has been representing her country since 2012 and has witnessed a group of players, many of whom are now in their mid-20s, develop into one of the world's best teams.

"I think we're looking really good, it's been a big couple of years for us as a team and I think we've started to take some strides – we've been looking towards this World Cup for a long time," says Catley, who turns out for local club Melbourne City in the W-League and Tacoma-based Reign FC in the NWSL (National Women's Soccer League) during Australia's off-season.

"I think we can really do something amazing, and I think we can go all the way. But we've got so much work to do before we get there as this is a key preparation stage, so what happens in the next couple of months will shape us going into the tournament.

"Based on what we've done in the last few years, the teams we've beaten and the way we've done it, I think we can really do something amazing."

Vice-captain of the national team, with more than 70 caps to her name, Catley's love affair with football began at a young age when she would join her older brother at his local football club.

Competitive by nature, she admits to

getting a kick out of being able to "beat the boys" and this is a streak that would help her break into the Australia side at just 18 years of age.

While her elder sibling may have first persuaded her to take up the beautiful game, it was a former Matilda who she drew inspiration from as she progressed from a kick-around with the boys towards playing in a more serious environment.

"I think it's very different now compared to what we had access to back then, in terms of watching women on TV, especially in Australia as not much was broadcasted," reflects Catley when quizzed on female idols growing up.

"I had Melissa Barbieri who was the captain of the Matildas and from a very young age she was involved in youth programmes in Victoria, where I'm from, so she was someone I idolised. I knew I wanted to represent the Matildas like her."

A goalkeeper in her playing days, Barbieri captained the Australia side to their first – and to date only – AFC Asian Cup title when they defeated DPR Korea on penalties in the 2010 final in the Chinese city of Chengdu.

Four years later in Vietnam, Catley, now an established member of the national team, was part of a young group of players tasked with defending their title.

But they would fall just short after a narrow

1-0 defeat in the final to a vastly more experienced Japan team that featured many of the same players who had led their country to the 2011 FIFA Women's World Cup title.

A year later, and with then 35-year-old Barbieri gaining a surprise recall to the squad, Catley appeared at her first FIFA Women's World Cup, in Canada. The opening game against the United States saw the defender line up alongside her idol in front of more than 30,000 spectators in Winnipeg, although the Matildas went down 3-1.

But four points from games against Nigeria and Sweden were enough to see the Australians into the last 16, where a 1-0 victory over Brazil thanks to a solitary Kyah Symon goal saw the Matildas through to their third successive quarter-final.

"That was probably one of my favourite memories from the national team," she admits.

"It was a rainy day in Moncton, in the middle of nowhere, and it was a pretty tough game, end to end, and we ended up scoring quite late and holding out well.

"I remember it being tough but it being the best feeling in the world, and it was as far as we had ever gone in the World Cup."

Familiar foes Japan awaited in the next

round and the 2014 scoreline was repeated, but in agonising fashion, as the Nadeshiko scored with three minutes remaining to eliminate Australia.

But the side's development was apparent and a year later at the Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro they again progressed to the knockout rounds, where, with a passionate home backing of more than 52,000, they took the hosts to penalties before losing 7-6.

"It's a strange one to think back to because it was such a whirlwind," recalls the defender. "When you're in the moment you're just so focused on the game that you don't let yourself absorb what's happening.

"I remember I tore my hamstring early so I had to go off, so that was pretty tough and we ended up losing so it was heart-breaking and hard for us to comprehend the pain.

"But I think back to it and the girls put in such a massive effort to get to penalties in front of Brazil's home support. It was massive for us to overcome [the crowd] and take the game to penalties.

"You see changes in crowds and the interest in the game. In Europe you've seen recent crowds of 60,000 and the [2015] World Cup final was sold out in something like 30 minutes. In Australia it's happening too. For our national team there's lots of interest and it seems to be happening all around the world."

Far Top Left
AFC Women's Asian Cup
Vietnam 2014

Top Left
2015 FIFA Women's World Cup

Above
AFC Women's Asian Cup
Jordan 2018

Far Bottom Left & Left
With Melbourne City

Arguably 2017 was the year the side truly came of age, with the highlight being their victory at the Tournament of Nations in the United States.

Not only was it Catley's first major honour with the senior team, the calibre of opposition beaten showed that the Matildas had what it took to overcome the best in the world.

A 1-0 victory over the hosts and 2015 world champions served as an indication Australia meant business ahead of their clash with Japan.

This time, the Matildas were too good for the East Asians with Samantha Kerr netting a hat-trick in a 4-2 win. Brazil proved no match in their final game of the round-robin tournament as a 6-1 victory saw the Australians crowned champions.

The ever-improving Kerr, who was later named the 2017 AFC Women's Player of the Year and was now being talked about in the same breath as some of the world's best players, finished as the top scorer on four goals.

"I've played alongside her and against

her for a long time and she's constantly just reading the play quicker than everyone else," says Catley of her international teammate.

"She's fast, dynamic, unpredictable and can shoot from anywhere – she's a player that is constantly thinking ahead. If you're not two steps ahead of her, she'll be gone. She's fun to watch for fans and as a player she's great to play with."

Between March 2017 and March 2018, Australia went 364 days without suffering a defeat and in December 2017 climbed to an all-time high of fourth in the FIFA World Rankings.

Things were looking good ahead of the 2018 AFC Women's Asian Cup in Jordan, a tournament the Matildas began as many people's favourites.

Catley scored in the semi-final penalty shootout victory over Thailand, but Australia would again lose out to Japan in the final as yet another late goal sealed another 1-0 victory.

The toing and froing between the Asian powerhouses continues, though, as the Australians ran out 2-0 winners in the 2018 Tournament of Nations. They again remained unbeaten in the competition but failed to defend their title, losing out on goal difference to the United States.



"We're in a constant battle with Japan. We played them in the AFC Asian Cup final again and came up against them in the last World Cup, so they're always a tough team," admits Catley.

"On any given day we can win or they can win – they're so smart and technical and they're always prepared for the big tournaments. We've always had a lot of respect for them but I think over the years we've caught up technically and tactically.

"We learnt a lot from the Asian Cup although I don't think we necessarily played our best football but we learnt how to grind out a result when we were not playing at our best and in terms of going into a tournament that is really important."

A big few months now await for Catley, with the new NWSL set to start in mid-April and the FIFA Women's World Cup beginning in early June.

Like many Australian players, the defender spends her time between her homeland and the States, with the timing of the NWSL season allowing for them to take part in both leagues.

"I've always seen America as great because you always get a competitive game no matter who you're up against.

"There are so many top players and every team is so strong, whereas in Europe it's

*All
2019 Cup of Nations*

been growing for a while but some leagues have two or three amazing teams then some other sides that aren't as close.

"I'd love to win an NWSL championship as that's something I've never done, but eventually I'd like to try Europe too."

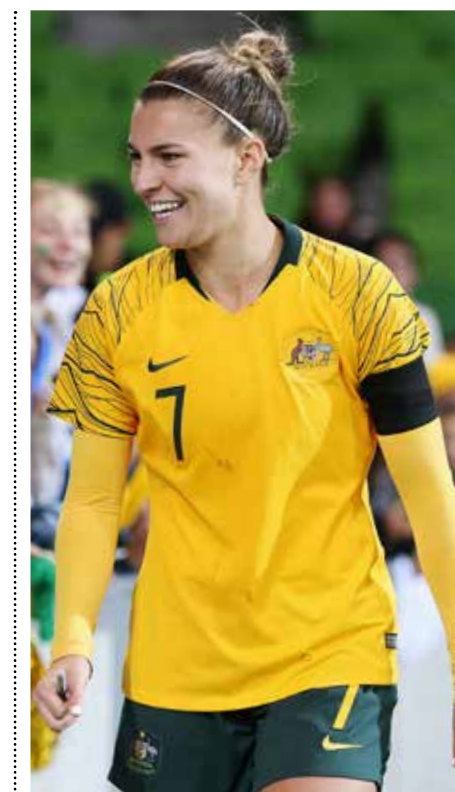
The experience gained both on the club and international scene in recent years will stand Catley in good stead ahead of her second FIFA Women's World Cup.

With a generation of players now reaching their prime, hopes are high that Australia can fulfil their dream and become world champions.

"We were feeling like we were pretty young [in the past]," adds Catley, whose side will line up alongside Italy, Jamaica and Brazil in Group C.

"We were quite experienced for how old we were and coming up against some of the bigger teams, we had some really good results, but it was tough and nerve-racking at times.

"I think we're going into this one so much more confident and assured of ourselves as individuals and as a team. I'd love to do something massive for the national team as we've been playing together for so many years."



FROM RUSSIA WITH GLOVES

AFTER YEARS OF UNRELENTING PERSISTENCE, DANG VAN LAM FINALLY REALISED HIS DREAM OF BECOMING VIETNAM'S NUMBER ONE GOALKEEPER AND, PART OF A GOLDEN GENERATION OF TALENT, HE CONTINUES TO SET THE BAR HIGH.

By: Peter Alsop Photos: Lagardère Sports

Thousands of Vietnam fans, many donning bright red t-shirts featuring the country's famed golden star, had descended upon Dubai's Al Maktoum Stadium to cheer on their heroes against Jordan in the last 16 of the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 in January.

A tense encounter played out in front of vibrant, vocal support for both teams inside one of Asia's newest and most atmospheric arenas. After 120 minutes of action, the sides could not be separated and the game would be decided from the spot.

Behind and to the right of goalkeeper Dang Van Lam, the Vietnamese contingent waited in bated breath. Jordan's second penalty smacked the bar, their third he saved. Three spot kicks later it was all over and the Golden Stars were in the quarter-finals. The goalkeeper milked the acclaim

of his ecstatic teammates as the red army celebrated in the stands.

The run was brought to an end after a narrow 1-0 defeat to Japan in the last eight, but this was a young Vietnam team that had now excelled at continental level having lifted the AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championship just a month earlier.

"Against Jordan, we knew they were a counter-attacking team but they couldn't do that against us as we had the tactics to control that; we played really well," reflects the 25-year-old.

"In penalties, I think it's like a lottery. I can save them but then the most important thing is the other players have to score them too. It was an amazing feeling to get through to the quarter-finals and it showed the level we are at."

For Van Lam, the route to Asia's last eight was far from simple and in his darkest moments he could have been forgiven for





thinking his dream may never happen.

Born in Moscow to a Vietnamese father and a Russian mother, Van Lam began playing at five years old, while one of his earliest footballing memories remains a 13-0 loss for which he was in goal.

Amazingly, scouts were not put off by the scoreline and saw talent in the young custodian, with his height, in particular, working in his favour. He went on to have spells with the academies at Moscow giants Spartak and Dynamo although, come the age of 18, the latter did not offer him a professional contract.

With his life at a crossroads and an ambition of making it big in his country of birth having taken a hit, Van Lam's thoughts turned to Southeast Asia.

"I decided I wanted to become the Vietnamese national team goalkeeper; I have Vietnamese blood in me so I wanted to go to Vietnam," explains Van Lam.

"I had been there when I was a kid – the first time when I was around nine months old – and I took my first steps there also. I went back when I was five and then 10 and I loved visiting because I had my father's family there so it was always good to go and see all my cousins, aunties and uncles."

But despite a burning ambition to make it in the fatherland, life in Vietnam got off to a

slow start as he struggled to find a club and, after eventually signing for Hoang Anh Gia Lai, he was later loaned out to Laotian side Hoang Anh Attapeu – an affiliated team with his parent club.

Van Lam openly admits to not enjoying life in the remote south of Laos, citing the food and training facilities as not being to his liking. After a year he returned to Vietnam but, by now, his father was urging him to return to Russia as the Vietnamese dream appeared to be slipping further from reality.

Following family pressure, Van Lam flew back to Moscow, only to face further complications. As he had represented Vietnam's U-19 team, he was now classed as a foreigner in his country of birth and, thus, less appealing to local teams, who wanted him to switch his allegiance back to Russia due to quotas on overseas players.

In May 2015, unsure of what to do, Van Lam would make a series of phone calls and social media posts that would ultimately prove life-changing.

"I could have changed my nationality back to Russian but under FIFA rules I was only allowed to do this once so I didn't know what to do," he admits.

"So I phoned an old coach of mine to ask for advice, and he told me not to change because Vietnam had a shortage of goalkeepers and

would maybe need me in the future.

"Next, I put a message on Facebook to ask for help to which journalists replied by posting the phone number of the Vietnam coach Toshiya Miura.

"I tried to see if I could get in the Vietnam squad for the SEA (Southeast Asian) Games, and Miura wanted to bring me, but in the end there was not enough time to get all the paperwork completed."

But many in Vietnam had seen the goalkeeper's posts on social media and, in his hour of need, Haiphong FC took the chance to sign him. Van Lam has not looked back since.

Initially the side's reserve 'keeper after his return to Vietnam, Van Lam got his chance following an injury to the club's first-choice custodian and promptly made the position his own.

In 2016 he was called up to the national team for the first time and the following year, in mid-2017, he kept a clean sheet on his debut – a 0-0 draw with Jordan in an AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 qualifier in Ho Chi Minh City.

"I remember my whole family was watching and I felt so proud to be representing Vietnam," he recalls.

"I was Player of the Match and since then I have been the number one keeper. After, I



said to myself my target was to win something with Vietnam."

As fate would have it, he had joined what many already considered a golden generation of players that included, among others, the prodigious talents of Nguyen Quang Hai, Nguyen Cong Phuong and Doan Van Hau, who had all excelled at youth level.

Vietnam secured their passage to a first AFC Asian Cup since co-hosting the tournament in 2007 after a scoreless draw with Afghanistan towards the end of 2017.

A year later and they began the 2018 AFF Championship with the aim of denying Thailand a third successive title, and progressed from the group stage with minimal fuss as Van Lam kept four consecutive clean sheets.

Back-to-back wins over the Philippines in the semi-finals saw Vietnam return to the final for the first time since winning the competition 10 years earlier.

And legendary status was acquired when a 1-0 victory over Malaysia in the second leg of the final in Hanoi secured a 3-2 aggregate win and a place in Vietnam's footballing history. Fans flocked to the streets once more and, this time, there was a title to celebrate.

"The AFF Championship was an amazing feeling. I remember after we won in the final I went to one of the posts and just started

Far Left 2018 AFF Championship

Left & Above AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019

.....

crying," he reveals.

"Not just in Hanoi but all over Vietnam, in every city, it was crazy. We got to our hotel in Hanoi and I looked out the window and it was like I was looking at the whole country."

The victory proved the perfect springboard to the AFC Asian Cup and, although they suffered a last-minute defeat to Iraq in their tournament opener and then lost to the Islamic Republic of Iran, a 2-0 win over Yemen secured a place in the last 16.

"It was different because you are up against the best teams in Asia, not just Southeast Asia," he says. "There was Iran, who I had seen play Spain and Portugal in the World Cup, and now they were in our group."

"Sardor Azmoun is the best striker I've played against; he scored two goals against me and his movement is very good. He is also doing so well in Russia and has signed for Zenit [Saint Petersburg]."

The ensuing victory over Jordan was Vietnam's first in an AFC Asian Cup knockout round match and, despite being eliminated by Japan in the last eight, the tournament was a resounding success.

Many of the side have grown up together

and, with so many still 25 or under, the future looks bright for this gifted crop of players.

"We want to be challenging at an Asian level, not just in Southeast Asia – the target has to be to reach the level of Japan and Korea [Republic]," insists Van Lam.

"To do this we have to build the foundations from the bottom for children to play from a young age. It's all about making the right facilities for the young players and they can develop over time."

"Of course it's every player's dream to make it to the World Cup, so I hope we can do that with Vietnam."

The immediate future will see Van Lam turn his attention to club duty after he signed for Thai giants Muangthong United earlier this year.

The ambition that led him from Russia to Vietnam as a teenager, that ensured he did not give up during an unhappy spell in Laos and that convinced him to send out a Facebook plea for help still burns bright.

"It would be great to get in the AFC Champions League and play against the best club sides in Asia," he adds.

"Muangthong have been champions of Thailand four times in the past and that's what I want to do. I want to become a champion."

PRIDE OF THAILAND

THERDSAK CHAIMAN WAS THE STAR OF THE INAUGURAL AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE AFTER THE FORMER THAILAND INTERNATIONAL’S GOALS FIRED BEC TERO SASANA INTO THE FINAL. SIXTEEN YEARS ON, THE 2002-03 MVP RECALLS A CAMPAIGN THAT REMAINS HIS COUNTRY’S BEST EVER ON THE CONTINENT.

By: Peter Alsop Photo: Lagardère Sports

In recent times, Thai club football appears to be enjoying a resurgence in the AFC Champions League. Both Muangthong United and Buriram United progressed past the group stage in 2017 and 2018 respectively, claiming some notable scalps along the way.

A number of the country’s top players, on the back of their performances on the continent, are now playing their trade overseas, with Chanathip Songkrasin and Theerathon Bunmathan excelling in Japan and goalkeeper Kavin Thamsatchanan making the move to Belgium.

Prior to 2017, though, you have to go back to 2013 for the last time a Thai side progressed to the knockout rounds, when Buriram made it to the quarter-finals. In the nine years previously, there had been no Thai presence beyond the group stage.

Indeed, it was the inaugural edition of the AFC Champions League, in 2002-03, where a Thai team produced their best performance as BEC Tero Sasana – now known as Police Tero FC – stunned their more illustrious opponents to make it to the final.

The then Thai champions had the advantage of the centralised group stage being played on home soil, with Japan’s Kashima Antlers, Daejeon Citizen of Korea Republic and China’s Shanghai Shenhua the visitors to Bangkok.

Among their ranks was Therdsak Chaiman, who was widely regarded as one of the best Southeast Asian players of his generation, having helped his club win two Thai Premier League titles and his nation twice lift the AFF (ASEAN Football Federation) Championship trophy since the turn of the Millennium.

“It was the first year of the AFC Champions League and the games were in Bangkok, but only one team could go to the semi-final,” recalled Therdsak.

“The Thai league was not professional at the time and the players still had to work. But we played at home so we had the advantage

of the home crowd.”

Unlike in today’s competition when the top two advance from the group stage, there was little margin for error with only the group winners progressing.

The hosts almost gave themselves a mountain to climb as, with the clock ticking down in their opening game against Kashima, they were on course for defeat until a last-minute equaliser salvaged a 2-2 draw.

Two days later, BEC Tero returned to Supachalasai Stadium to face Daejeon and ran out 2-0 winners, with Therdsak grabbing the second as they moved to the top of the standings.

Going into the final group match against Shanghai, the Thai side knew a win guaranteed a spot in the semi-finals and they opened the scoring in the first half, but the game was left on a knife edge after Shanghai levelled.

Then, with five minutes to play, Therdsak picked up the ball on the right side, cut inside two players and drilled home a fizzing left-foot strike from 20 yards to seal victory and a place in the last four.

“The highlight for me was when we played against Shanghai Shenhua because we had to beat them, we could not draw,” said the former attacking midfielder.

“We were drawing 1-1 until about 86 minutes. Then I scored and we won 2-1. If we drew, maybe Kashima or Daejeon would have qualified, so I was very happy.”

Uzbekistan’s Pakhtakor awaited in the semi-finals and, with BEC Tero to travel away in the second leg, a strong performance in Bangkok was needed.

With the hosts 2-1 up in the final 10 minutes, Therdsak again proved the hero as his free-kick ensured they headed to Central Asia with the breathing space of a two-goal lead.

And that goal proved crucial after Server Djeparov’s late strike in Tashkent secured a 1-0 win for Pakhtakor that was ultimately insufficient for them to progress.

“We didn’t expect we would come top of the group, but that gave us more confidence,” admitted the now 45-year-old.

“In the semi-final we played against Pakhtakor, the best team in Uzbekistan with a lot of international players. Djeparov, who later was twice the AFC Player of the Year, also played at that time.

“I scored the third goal, a free-kick, and we beat them 3-1. It wasn’t easy in Tashkent, it was very cold and they attacked a lot. We defended well and made the final.”

The final showdown pitted BEC Tero against Al Ain of the United Arab Emirates, but a 2-0 away defeat in the first leg left them with it all to do at Rajamangala Stadium.

An hour in and with the game still goalless, Therdsak converted a penalty to offer real hope to those inside the packed national stadium. The hosts almost got the second but had a goal ruled out and, despite a gallant effort, had to settle for the runners-up medal.

Therdsak had netted four goals in the competition and was also named the Most Valuable Player as he showcased his talent to the entire continent.

“After I scored we had a chance and we became more confident as a team,” he added. “We couldn’t get the second goal but I was still happy because, even if we were not champions, we beat them in Thailand. It was not easy to get to the final.

“I never expected to be named MVP, so I was so shocked when the officials came to me and said, ‘Go to get the MVP award’. When I retired, I still had this award so it makes me very happy.”

Thailand waited a long time to see another of its sides reach the knockout rounds and, realistically, a place in the AFC Champions League final may be unlikely in the near future.

But with their best club sides starting to show form on the continent once more, there is renewed hope that Buriram and other teams from the country’s top tier can emulate BEC Tero Sasana and Therdsak in the years ahead.



MAN OF THE SAND

HAVING STARTED HIS FOOTBALL CAREER IN THE MORE CONVENTIONAL 11-A-SIDE GAME, WALEED BESH SWAPPED CODES AFTER BEING TEMPTED INTO THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES’ BURGEONING BEACH SOCCER SCENE AND HE HAS NOT LOOKED BACK SINCE.

Interview by: Tom Engelhardt Written by: Peter Alsop Photo: Asian Football Confederation

Few people, if any, can lay claim to the finest moments of their career having been enjoyed on the pristine sands of the Bahamas, Malaysia, and Thailand, but that’s exactly what Waleed Beshr can do.

The United Arab Emirates’ beach soccer player has been an integral part of the national side in recent years and made arguably his most important contribution at the AFC Beach Soccer Championship Thailand 2019 in March.

With the scores locked at 2-2 in the semi-final against regional rivals Oman in Pattaya, Beshr’s bouncing effort with two minutes to play looped over the goalkeeper to seal a place in the final and confirm the UAE’s ticket to the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay later this year.

“Everyone in the UAE was very happy because of our win,” says 28-year-old Beshr.

“I was so happy when I saw my colleagues and team and everyone in the UAE, including my family, my friends and my people.

“It was a tough match against Oman, and I was able to score the third goal for UAE, which was a really important goal.”

Beshr had scored in group stage wins over Kyrgyz Republic and Lebanon, but it was his strike against the 2015 Asian champions that will go down in Emirati beach soccer history as the Gulf nation secured a place in their sixth FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup.

It also ensured the 2007 and 2008 Asian champions of a place in their fourth final, having finished as runners-up two years ago following a 7-2 defeat by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But after fighting back from two down against Japan to eventually force penalties, the West Asians suffered a 3-1 defeat from the spot as their excellent campaign ended in disappointment.

The Emiratis returned home with plenty to look forward to, though, as they will take their place among the world’s finest beach soccer teams in Asuncion in November.

In 2017, Beshr was part of the squad at the 16-team global showpiece in the Bahamas, where the UAE put on a fine display to defeat Paraguay 3-2 in their opening group game with Beshr firing home an excellent winner.

With no draws in beach soccer, the Emiratis then beat Panama on penalties in their next game, only to narrowly miss out on a spot in the knockout rounds following an extra-time defeat to Portugal.

“Before we went, my goal was just to reach the World Cup, to experience the World Cup and maybe to see some of the celebrity players in the world,” admits Beshr.

“When I played in the Bahamas I had a good experience, but now my goal isn’t just to reach the World Cup, I want to get the trophy.

“This is not just a dream, I will work as hard as I can with my colleagues and the team and my coach to reach this goal.”

Now truly established as one of the finest beach soccer players in Asia, Beshr was not initially convinced about taking up the version of the beautiful game he now loves.

Beshr’s first dream was to make it big in the 11-a-side game, and he represented sides including Al Nasr, Dubai Club, Ajman and Sharjah in his early playing days.

Emirati beach soccer was beginning to take off just over a decade ago, though, with the UAE being crowned Asian champions in 2007 and 2008 – tournaments that were both held in Dubai.

Three factors would ultimately convince Beshr to swap codes: the UAE’s decision to launch a national league, Brazilian coach Marcelo Mendes and his own brother, Ahmed, who already played for the Emiratis.

“At that stage, the coach of the national team was Marcelo from Brazil, and he saw me in the national league,” explains Beshr.

“After that he called me to the national team. It started from there with beach soccer, and now beach soccer is my life.

“But we have had players who have come to play with us from football who don’t really

like beach soccer because it requires more fitness. You must also love it, too. If you don’t love it, it will be difficult to succeed.”

Beshr talks passionately about the sport, and, seeing how members of opposing teams interacted with each other away from the pitch in Pattaya, it’s easy to see how it can become more than just a job.

The same teams are regularly competing against each other around the globe and, with numbers far fewer than in football, there becomes a certain familiarity between those involved.

“Beach soccer is a unique community; there is a friendship between the players and the coaches which is very good,” he notes.

“There are many reasons for this, one is that there are not as many players involved as in football or futsal, so we know all the coaches and all the players.

“The community of beach soccer players is small and we can definitely say it’s unique.”

While hugely popular in certain parts of the world, namely Brazil and southern Europe, beach soccer remains a growing sport in Asia, although the continent’s teams have already proven that they can compete with the best.

Japan finished fourth in the inaugural FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Brazil in 2005, while Iran were hugely impressive in finishing third in the Bahamas in 2017.

The UAE, while regular qualifiers, have yet to go beyond the first round, although if their showing two years ago is anything to go by, they can certainly expect to challenge for that next time round.

Iran will miss out on the tournament in Paraguay after defeat to Japan in the quarter-finals in Pattaya, with Oman joining Japan and the UAE as Asia’s representatives in South America.

“UAE, Iran, Oman and Japan are very important teams in the world, not just in Asia,” Beshr adds.

“In the last World Cup in the Bahamas, Iran reached third in the world, and this is good not just for Iran, but for Asia.

“I hope we will do well at this World Cup.”





Qatar Claim Maiden Asian Title

Qatar were crowned AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 champions after a 3-1 victory over Japan in the final at Zayed Sports City at the beginning of February. Skipper Hasan Al Haydos raised the trophy into the Abu Dhabi sky after the Qataris had made it seven wins from seven in the United Arab Emirates by disposing of four-time champions Japan in ruthless fashion.

Almoez Ali opened the scoring with a sublime bicycle kick inside 15 minutes before Abdulaziz Hatem doubled their advantage with a fine effort from distance as the 30-minute mark approached.

With just over 20 minutes to play, Takumi Minamino set up a gripping finale, but Akram Afif settled the 17th edition of the continental competition by converting a penalty with seven minutes to play after Maya Yoshida handled in the box.

Striker Ali eclipsed Ali Daei's eight goals in 1996 to set a new scoring record with his tally of nine in a single campaign, while the 22-year-old was also named the tournament's MVP.

The triumph saw Qatar join Japan, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Korea Republic, Israel, Kuwait, Iraq and Australia – the defending champions going into the tournament – on the AFC Asian Cup Roll of Honour.

Japan also went into the final on the back of six wins from six and chasing an unprecedented fifth title, having won a record fourth in Qatar eight years earlier. But Hajime Moriyasu's men failed to add to a haul that saw them lift the trophy four times in six editions between 1992 and 2011.

Qatar had earlier advanced to the last 16 as Group E winners following victories over Lebanon, DPR Korea and Saudi Arabia, who also progressed having finished in second place.

Successive wins over Turkmenistan, Oman and Uzbekistan saw Japan into the knockout rounds as Group F table-toppers, followed by the Uzbeks in second place. The Omanis, meanwhile, joined them after claiming one of the spots available for the four best-placed sides finishing third in their group.

Hosts the UAE finished on top of a compact Group A, a point ahead of Thailand and Bahrain, who both qualified as India exited on three points.

Defending champions Australia lost their tournament opener to Jordan, but advanced to the next stage behind the Jordanians after beating Syria and Palestine.

Korea Republic won three from three to top Group C, with China finishing second and Kyrgyz Republic qualifying in third after defeating fellow newcomers the Philippines in their last group game.

Iran and Iraq led the way in Group D and they were joined in the next round by

Vietnam after the Southeast Asians made it three defeats from three for Yemen.

The UAE needed extra-time to see off Kyrgyz Republic 3-2 in the Round of 16 and set up a quarter-final clash against Australia, who edged past Uzbekistan on penalties.

Basham Al Rawi's goal saw Qatar overcome Iraq to line up a date with Korea Republic in the last eight after the Taeguk Warriors eliminated Bahrain 2-1 following extra-time.

Japan did just enough to get past Saudi Arabia as a 1-0 victory meant a quarter-final meeting with Vietnam, who defeated Jordan on penalties.

China got a scare against Thailand but came through 2-1 while Iran were too good for Oman, advancing after a 2-0 victory.

Ali Mabkhout struck the only goal of the game as the hosts eliminated the holders in the quarter-finals to set up a tie against Qatar, after Hatem dealt the knockout blow for the Qataris against Korea Republic in another 1-0 win.

A Ritsu Doan penalty saw Japan oust Vietnam 1-0 and they would meet Iran in the semi-finals after Carlos Queiroz's men overcame China 3-0.

Qatar's amazing run continued in the last four as they proved too good for the hosts in a resounding 4-0 victory that saw them into their first final.

And they were joined by Japan, who ended Iranian hopes – and the reign of long-standing coach Queiroz – with a 3-0 win.



Group A								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE	3	1	2	0	4	2	2	5
Thailand	3	1	1	1	3	5	-2	4
Bahrain	3	1	1	1	2	2	0	4
India	3	1	0	2	4	4	0	3

05/01/19
UAE 1 (Ahmed Khalil 88 pen) Bahrain 1 (Mohamed Al Romaihi 78)
06/01/19
Thailand 1 (Teerasil Dangda 33) India 4 (Sunil Chhetri 27 pen, 46, Anirudh Thapa 68, Jeje Lalpekhlua 80)
10/01/19
Thailand 1 (Chanathip Songkrasin 58) Bahrain 0
UAE 2 (Khalfan Mubarak 41, Ali Mabkhout 88) India 0
14/01/19
UAE 1 (Ali Mabkhout 7) Thailand 1 (Thitiphan Puangchan 41)
India 0 Bahrain 1 (Jamal Rashid 91 pen)

Group B								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	3	2	1	0	3	0	3	7
Australia	3	2	0	1	6	3	3	6
Palestine	3	0	2	1	0	3	-3	2
Syria	3	0	1	2	2	5	-3	1

06/01/19
Australia 0 Jordan 1 (Anas Bani Yaseen 26)
Syria 0 Palestine 0
10/01/19
Jordan 2 (Musa Al Taamari 26, Tareq Khattab 43) Syria 0
11/01/19
Palestine 0 Australia 3 (Jamie Maclaren 18, Awer Mabil 20, Apostolos Giannou 90)
15/01/19
Australia 3 (Awer Mabil 41, Christopher Ikonomidis 54, Tomas Rogic 90+3) Syria 2 (Omar Khribin 43, Omar Al Soma 80 pen)
Palestine 0 Jordan 0

Group C								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	3	0	0	4	0	4	9
China	3	2	0	1	5	3	2	6
Kyrgyz Republic	3	1	0	2	4	4	0	3
Philippines	3	0	0	3	1	7	-6	0

07/01/19
China 2 (Pavel Matyash 50 OG, Yu Dabao 78)Kyrgyz Republic 1 (Akhlidn Israilov 42)
Korea Republic 1 (Hwang Ui-jo 67) Philippines 0
11/01019
China 3 (Wu Lei 40, 66, Yu Dabao 80) Philippines 0
Kyrgyz Republic 0 Korea Republic 1 (Kim Min-jae 41)
16/01/19
Korea Republic 2 (Hwang Ui-jo 14 pen, Kim Min-jae 41) China 0
Kyrgyz Republic 3 (Vitalij Lux 24, 51, 77)
Philippines 1 (Stephan Schrock 80)

Group D								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iran	3	2	1	0	7	0	7	7
Iraq	3	2	1	0	6	2	4	7
Vietnam	3	1	0	2	4	5	-1	3
Yemen	3	0	0	3	0	10	-10	0

07/01/19
Iran 5 (Mehdi Taremi 12, 25, Ashkan Dejagah 23, Sardar Azmoun 53, Saman Ghodds 78) Yemen 0
Iraq 3 (Mohanad Ali 35, Humam Tareq 60, Ali Adnan 90) Vietnam 2 (Ali Faez 24 OG, Nguyen Cong Phuong 42)
12/01/19
Iran 2 (Sardar Azmoun 38, 69) Vietnam 0
Yemen 0 Iraq 3 (Mohanad Ali 11, Bashar Resan 19, Alaa Abbas 90+1)
16/01/19
Vietnam 2 (Nguyen Quang Hai 38, Que Ngoc Hai 64 pen) Yemen 0
Iran 0 Iraq 0

Group E								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	3	3	0	0	10	0	10	9
Saudi Arabia	3	2	0	1	6	2	4	6
Lebanon	3	1	0	2	4	5	-1	3
DPR Korea	3	0	0	3	1	14	-13	0

08/01/19
Saudi Arabia 4 (Hatan Bahebri 28, Mohammed Al Fatil 37, Salem Al Dawasari 70, Fahad Al Muwallad 87) DPR Korea 0
09/01/19
Qatar 2 (Bassam Al Rawi 65, Almoez Ali 79) Lebanon 0
12/01/19
Saudi Arabia 2 (Fahad Al Muwallad 12, Hussein Al Mogahwi 67) Lebanon 0
13/01/19
DPR Korea 0 Qatar 6 (Almoez Ali 9, 11, 55, 60, Boualem Khoukhi 43, Abdelkarim Hassan 68)
17/01/19
Saudi Arabia 0 Qatar 2 (Almoez Ali 45+1, 80) Lebanon 4 (George Melki 27, Hilal El Helwe 65, 90+8, Hassan Maatouk 80 pen) DPR Korea 1 (Pak Kwang-ryong 9)

Group F								
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	6	3	3	9
Uzbekistan	3	2	0	1	7	3	4	6
Oman	3	1	0	2	4	4	0	3
Turkmenistan	3	0	0	3	3	10	-7	0

09/01/19
Japan 3 (Yuya Osaka 56, 60, Ritsu Doan 71)
Turkmenistan 2 (Arslanmyrat Armanov 26, Ahmet Atayew 79 pen)
Uzbekistan 2 (Odil Ahmedov 34, Eldor Shomurodov 85) Oman 1 (Muhsen Al Ghassani 72)
13/01/19
Oman 0 Japan 1 (Genki Haraguchi 28 pen)
Turkmenistan 0 Uzbekistan 4 (Javokhir Sidikov 17, Eldor Shomurodov 24, 42, Jaloliddin Masharipov 40)
17/01/19
Oman 3 (Ahmed Kano 20, Muhsen Al Ghassani 84, Mohammed Al Musalami 90+3) Turkmenistan 1 (Altymyrat Annadurdyev 41)
Japan 2 (Yoshinori Muto 43, Tsukasa Shiotani 58) Uzbekistan 1 (Eldor Shomurodov 40)

Round of 16

20/01/19
Jordan 1 (Baha' Adbelrahman 39) Vietnam 1 (Nguyen Cong Phuong 51)
Vietnam win 4-2 on penalties
Thailand 1 (Supachai Jaidee 31) China 2 (Xiao Zhi 67, Gao Lin 71 pen)
Iran 2 (Alireza Jahanbakhsh 31, Ashkan Dejagah 41 pen) Oman 0
21/01/19
Japan 1 (Takehiro Tomiyasu 20) Saudi Arabia 0
Australia 0 Uzbekistan 0
Australia win 4-2 on penalties
UAE 3 (Khamis Esmacel 14, Ali Mabkhout 64, Ahmed Khalil 103 pen) Kyrgyz Republic 2 (Mirlan Murzaev 26, Tursunali Rustamov 90+1) AET
22/01/19
Korea Republic 2 (Hwang Hee-chan 43, Kim Jin-su 105+2) Bahrain 1 (Mohamed Al Romaihi 77) AET
Qatar 1 (Bassam Al Rawi 62) Iraq 0

Quarter-Finals

24/01/19
Vietnam 0 Japan 1 (Ritsu Doan 57 pen)
China 0 Iran 3 (Mehdi Taremi 18, Sardar Azmoun 31, Karim Ansarifard 90+1)
25/01/19
Korea Republic 0 Qatar 1 (Abdulaziz Hatem 78)
UAE 1 (Ali Mabkhout 68) Australia 0

Semi-Finals

28/01/19
Iran 0 Japan 3 (Yuya Osaka 56, 67 pen, Genki Haraguchi 90+1)
29/01/19
Qatar 4 (Boualem Khoukhi 22, Almoez Ali 37, Hasan Al Haydos 80, Hamid Ismail 90+3) UAE 0

Final

01/02/19
Japan 1 (Takumi Minamino 69) Qatar 3 (Almoez Ali 12, Abdulaziz Hatem 27, Akram Afif 83 pen)





Daegu FC And Al Hilal Enjoy Perfect Starts

Korea Republic debutants Daegu FC and Saudi Arabia's Al Hilal were the only two teams to post 100 percent records in their opening two games of the 2019 AFC Champions League, while Al Zawraa became the first Iraqi side to compete in the continental competition since 2008.

Daegu's maiden appearance began with a 3-1 win at Melbourne Victory in Group F before they defeated two-time champions Guangzhou Evergrande by the same scoreline in front of home support as Brazilian Edgar took his tally to three goals in two games.

The Korean side sit three points ahead of Guangzhou and Japan's Sanfrecce Hiroshima, whose 2-1 victory over Melbourne left the Australian team propping up the standings after two games.

Runners-up in 2017, Al Hilal ended a nine-game winless run in the competition by recording their first-ever win in Al Ain after Mohammad Al Shalhoub scored the only goal of the game in Group C on Matchday One, and the Saudi side then returned to Riyadh to see off Al Duhail 3-1 and open up a three-point lead over the Qatari side.

Former continental champions Al Ain and Esteghlal have plenty work to after their 1-1 draw on Matchday Two left them five points off the top and two adrift of Al Duhail.

Defending champions Kashima Antlers remain unbeaten in Group E after defeating tournament newcomers Johor Darul Ta'zim 2-1 in their opening match of the campaign, before drawing 2-2 with China's Shandong Luneng.

Shandong's return to the competition for the first time since 2016 was a 2-2 draw with

another Korea Republic debutant, Gyeongnam FC, who went on to draw 1-1 with Johor in their second fixture as the Malaysian side picked up their maiden point in the competition.

Al Zawraa's first appearance in the competition since 2007 was a respectable 0-0 draw away at the Islamic Republic of Iran's Zobahan in Group A, but things got even better for the Iraqi team as they ran out comprehensive 5-0 winners over the United Arab Emirates' Al Wasl at Karbala International Stadium in what



was the first-ever AFC Champions League game to be held in Iraq.

Al Wasl had earlier won their opening game of the campaign 1-0 against Saudi Arabia's Al Nassr, whose 3-2 loss to Zobahan on Matchday Two leaves them still in search of their first points.

In Group B, Uzbekistan's Lokomotiv and Saudi Arabia's Al Ittihad defeated the UAE's Al Wahda and Qatar's Al Rayyan respectively to enjoy perfect starts on Matchday One.

But a week later, Al Wahda beat two-time

winners Al Ittihad and Al Rayyan overcame Lokomotiv to leave all four teams on three points after two games.

Finalists last year, Persepolis have got off to a slow start in Group D, picking up one point from two games after following a 1-1 draw against Uzbekistan's Pakhtakor with a 1-0 defeat to Qatar's Al Sadd in a game that saw last year's AFC Champions League top scorer Baghdad Bounedjah net deep into injury time.

Pakhtakor lead the way after going on to claim a 1-0 win over Saudi Arabia's Al Ahli, who had earlier beaten Al Sadd 2-0 in their opening game of the competition.

Champions in 2017, Urawa Red Diamonds enjoyed a winning return to continental action in Group G having missed out last year as they saw off Thailand's Buriram United 3-0 before ending goalless against China's Beijing FC a week later.

Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors, who won their last continental title in 2016, were 3-1 winners over Beijing on Matchday One, as Lee Dong-gook scored his record 37th AFC Champions League goal, but they then suffered a 1-0 loss to Buriram to leave Urawa topping the standings after two games.

Finally, 2012 winners Ulsan Hyundai of Korea Republic lead the way in Group H after following a scoreless draw in Australia against Sydney FC with a narrow 1-0 victory over China's Shanghai SIPG.

J.League champions Kawasaki Frontale, meanwhile, lost their opening game 1-0 in Shanghai before ending an eight-game winless run on the continent when Manabu Saito scored the only goal of the game against Sydney to move within a point of Ulsan.



Group Stage																	
Group A				Group B				Group C									
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Zawraa	2	1	1	0	5	0	5	4	Al Ittihad	2	1	0	1	6	5	1	3
Zobahan	2	1	1	0	3	2	1	4	Al Wahda	2	1	0	1	4	3	1	3
Al Wasl	2	1	0	1	1	5	-4	3	Lokomotiv	2	1	0	1	3	2	1	3
Al Nassr	2	0	0	2	2	4	-2	0	Al Rayyan	2	1	0	1	3	6	-3	3
04/03/19				04/03/19				05/03/19									
Al Wasl 1 (Fabio Lima 62 pen) Al Nassr 0				Lokomotiv 2 (Temiurkhuja Abdulkholiqov 5, Islom Tukhtajuyev 90+3) Al Wahda 0				Al Duhail 3 (Medhi Banatia 56, Youssef El Arabi 73, Ali Afif 90+1) Esteghlal 0									
11/03/19				Al Ittihad 5 (Fahad Al Murwallad 45, 78, Abdulaziz Al Aryan 45+1, Ziyad Al Sahafi 48, Abdulrahman Al Ghamdi 70 pen) Al Rayyan 1 (Gonzalo Viera 23)				Al Ain 0 Al Hilal 1 (Mohammad Al Shalhoub 65) 12/03/19									
Al Zawraa 5 (Samal Saeed 22, Alaa Abbas 36, 51, Mohanad Abdulraheem 75, Hussein Jwayed 84 pen) Al Wasl 0				11/03/19				Al Hilal 3 (Carlos Eduardo 25, Ali Al Bulaihi 77, Bafetimbi Gomis 79) Al Duhail 1 (Shoja Nakajima 75) Esteghlal 1 (Farshid Bagheri 53) Al Ain 1 (Tsukasa Shiotani 85)									
Al Nassr 2 (Giuliano 5, Abderrazak Hamdallah 58 pen) Zobahan 3 (Mohammad Nejadmehdi 30, Vahid Mohammadzadeh 39, Amir Motahari 90+1)				Al Rayyan 2 (Lucca 38, Gelmim Rivas 58) Lokomotiv 1 (Diyorjon Turapov 4) Al Wahda 4 (Mohammed Barqesh 16, Leonardo 52, 90+1, Ismail Matar 80) Al Ittihad 1 (Nasser Al Shamrani 56)													

Group Stage																										
Group E				Group F				Group G				Group H														
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Kashima Antlers	2	1	1	0	4	3	1	4	Daegu FC	2	2	0	0	6	2	4	6	Urawa	2	1	1	0	3	0	3	4
Shandong	2	0	2	0	4	4	0	2	Guangzhou	2	1	0	1	3	3	0	3	Buriram United	2	1	0	1	1	3	-2	3
Gyeongnam FC	2	0	2	0	3	3	0	2	Sanfrece	2	1	0	1	2	3	-1	3	Jeonbuk	2	1	0	1	3	2	1	3
Johor Darul Ta'zim	2	0	1	1	2	3	-1	1	Melbourne	2	0	0	2	2	5	-3	0	Beijing FC	2	0	1	1	1	3	-2	1
05/03/19				05/03/19				05/03/19				06/03/19				06/03/19										
Kashima Antlers 2 (Taiki Hirato 43, Serginho 56) Johor 1 (Diogo 80)				Melbourne Victory 1 (Ola Toivonen 29) Daegu FC 3 (Cesinha 31, Hwang Soon-min 41, Edgar 61)				Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 3 (Han Kyo-won 14, Lee Dong-gook 48, Kim Shin-wook 71) Beijing FC 1 (Zhang Xizhe 41)				Shanghai SIPG 1 (Hulk 89 pen) Kawasaki Frontale 0														
Gyeongnam FC 2 (Woo Joo-sung 60, Kim Seung-jun 68) Shandong Luneng 2 (Graziano Pelle 21, 77) 12/03/19				Guangzhou Evergrande 2 (Talisca 19, Paulinho 26) Sanfrece Hiroshima 0				Urawa Red Diamonds 3 (Tomoaki Makino 51, Daiki Hashioka 75, 88) Buriram United 0				Sydney FC 0 Ulsan Hyundai 0														
Pakhtakor 1 (Marat Bikmaev 62) Al Ahli 0				Sanfrece Hiroshima 2 (Shunki Higashi 3, Daiki Watari 86) Melbourne Victory 1 (Keisuke Honda 71)				13/03/19				Ulsan Hyundai 1 (Junior Negrao 56) Shanghai SIPG 0														
Al Sadd 1 (Baghdad Bounedjah 90+4) Persepolis 0				Daegu FC 3 (Edgar 24, 43, Kim Dae-won 81) Guangzhou Evergrande 1 (Talisca 53)				Buriram United 1 (Supachok Sarachat 50) Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 0				Kawasaki Frontale 1 (Manabu Saito 83) Sydney FC 0														



Al Wehdat And Ceres Negros Set The Pace

Jordan's Al Wehdat and Ceres Negros of the Philippines were the only two sides to win both their opening games in the AFC Cup as the West and ASEAN Zones got underway at the end of February. Iraq's Air Force Club have won the competition in each of the past three years, but with the defending champions not in this year's edition, there will be a new name on the trophy for the first time since 2016.

In Group A, Saeed Murjan ensured a winning start for Al Wehdat as they defeated Lebanon's NejmeH 1-0 in Amman in their opening game. Baha Faisal then scored a six-minute hat-trick and ended up with four goals in a resounding 6-2 victory over Palestine's Hilal Al Quds.

Debutants Hilal Al Quds had earlier drawn their maiden game in the competition with inaugural winners Al Jaish of Syria, who went on to beat NejmeH in their second game to move into second place in the standings.

Three-time AFC Cup winners Kuwait SC returned for the first time since 2015 and played out a scoreless draw with 2010 champions Al Ittihad of Syria in their opening Group B game, before going down 1-0 to Jordan's Al Jazeera, who had earlier drawn 1-1 with Bahrain's Al Najma.

Both Al Jazeera and Al Najma lead the way on four points after the Bahraini Club went on to beat Al Ittihad 2-1 in their Matchday Two fixture.

Another former champion, 2014 winners Qadsia SC of Kuwait, also returned to the

competition and have fared better than their domestic rivals thus far, picking up a point against Lebanon's Al Ahed and then seeing off Oman's Al Suwaiq 2-0.

They sit level on four points with Bahrain's Malkiya Club at the top of Group C after Malkiya followed a 2-1 opening-day win over Al Suwaiq with a scoreless draw against Al Ahed.

ASEAN Zonal finalists in the past two years, Ceres began their Group G campaign with a hard-fought 3-2 victory over Myanmar's Shan United, before Spaniard Bienvenido Maranon scored a hat-trick in a 3-1 win over Vietnam's Becamex Binh Duong.

Indonesian champions Persija Jakarta began their tournament with a 0-0 draw at home to Becamex but went on to post a 3-1 win over Shan and move into second place, two points adrift of Ceres.

In Group F, Ganiyu Oseni scored four as Hanoi FC routed Cambodia's Naga World 10-0 in what was the AFC Cup's biggest

ever winning margin, while Singapore's Tampines Rovers defeated Myanmar's Yangon United 3-1 in their opening fixture.

Hanoi and Tampines are out in front on four points after drawing with each other on Matchday Two, while debutants Naga World secured their first ever win in the competition after seeing off Yangon 2-1.

The opening round of games in Group H both ended 1-1 as 2018 ASEAN Zonal champions Home United of Singapore drew with Indonesia's PSM Makassar, while Lao Toyota of Laos and the Philippines' Kaya FC-Iloilo also ended all square.

But Makassar and Kaya then moved clear at the top after the former beat the Laotian side 7-3 and the latter posted a 5-0 victory over Home.

The 2019 AFC Cup will resume in early April when the 12 teams in the Central, South and East Zones will also open their campaigns.



Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Al Wehdat	2	2	0	0	7	2	5	6
Al Jaish	2	1	1	0	2	1	1	4
Hilal Al Quds	2	0	1	1	3	7	-4	1
NejmeH	2	0	0	2	0	2	-2	0

25/02/19
Al Jaish 1 (Ahmad Ashkar 49) Hilal Al Quds 1 (Mohammad Obaid 18)
Al Wehdat 1 (Saeed Murjan 11) NejmeH 0
11/03/19
Hilal Al Quds 2 (Hani Abdallah 26, Oday Dabbagh 89 pen) Al Wehdat 6 (Mohammad Al Basha 16, Baha Faisal 35, 38, 41, 86, Saleh Rateb 78)
NejmeH 0 Al Jaish 1 (Bassel Moustafa 39)



Group Stage										Group Stage									
Group B		Group C		Group D		Group E		Group F		Group G		Group H		Group I					
	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts		
Al Jazeera	2	1	1	0	2	1	1	4	Qadsia SC	2	1	1	0	2	0	2	4		
Al Najma	2	1	1	0	3	2	1	4	Malkiya Club	2	1	1	0	2	1	1	4		
Al Ittihad	2	0	1	1	1	2	-1	1	Al Ahed	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	2		
Kuwait SC	2	0	1	1	0	1	-1	1	Al Suwaiq	2	0	0	2	1	4	-3	0		
25/02/19									26/02/19										
Kuwait SC 0 Al Ittihad 0									Al Ahed 0 Qadsia SC 0										
Al Najma 1 (Ibrahim Habeeb 31) Al Jazeera 1 (Mahmoud Al Mardi 18)									Al Suwaiq 1 (Muhsen Al Ghassani 23) Malkiya Club 2 (Hashim Isa 31, Isa Abdul Bari 59)										
11/03/19									12/03/19										
Al Ittihad 1 (Rafat Muhtadi 38) Al Najma 2 (Ali Madan 32, Mouhamadou Drame 60)									Malkiya Club 0 Al Ahed 0										
Al Jazeera 1 (Mahmoud Zatar 59) Kuwait SC 0									Qadsia SC 2 (Yousef Nasser 30, Ahmed Al Dhefiri 89)										
									Al Suwaiq 0										

Japan Defeat UAE In Beach Soccer Finale



Japan were crowned Asian champions for the third time after a penalty shootout victory over the United Arab Emirates in the AFC Beach Soccer Championship Thailand 2019 followed a 2-2 draw in the final in Pattaya on March 17.

The win marked the first time the Samurai Blue had claimed the title since the tournament fell under the Asian Football Confederation banner in 2017, having earlier won the continental competition in 2009 and 2011.

Masuyaki Komaki and Ozu Moreira put the East Asians two up but a quick-fire double from Ali Mohammad levelled proceedings to mean the game was ultimately decided from the spot.

With the score at 2-1 to Japan, Walid Mohammad missed for the Emiratis and Takaaki Oba fired home the winner for Ruy Ramos's team as the UAE finished runners-up for the second consecutive tournament.

The two finalists along with third-placed Oman booked their tickets to the FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup in Paraguay in November.

Japan began their campaign in Group C and posted big wins against Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain to advance to the quarter-finals with minimal fuss, while the Bahrainis progressed in second place.

The UAE topped Group B with three wins from three after a narrow 3-2 victory over Lebanon in their third match followed comprehensive victories against Kyrgyz Republic and China. Six points from their opening two games also saw the Lebanese into the last eight.

Hosts Thailand, suffered successive losses to Palestine and Malaysia in Group A as they were eliminated after just two games, before defeating

Afghanistan. Palestine topped the standings on nine points, while Malaysia edged through in second place.

The 2015 Asian champions Oman won the three-team Group D after defeating Iraq and then claiming an entertaining 4-3 victory over the defending champions Islamic Republic of Iran, who finished second having earlier beaten Iraq.

The loss to Oman would ultimately prove costly for Iran as they ran into fellow heavyweights Japan in the quarter-finals, where, after going two up, they lost a thrilling contest 3-2.

The UAE had few problems in disposing of Malaysia as Haitham Mohamed and Walid Mohammad each scored twice in an 8-1 win.

With the scores tied at 3-3 between Oman and Bahrain, Khalid Al Oraiimi put the Omanis a goal up before Yahya Al Araimi completed the scoring to eliminate their Gulf rivals.

Another entertaining clash rounded off the last eight, with Palestine edging Lebanon 4-3 after Mahmoud Al Neirab netted a late penalty to decide a thrilling contest.

Japan secured their place in the final for the eighth time in nine editions of the tournament as Moreira scored twice in a resounding 6-0 victory over Palestine.

It was not so straightforward for the UAE, though, but they eventually scraped past Oman 3-2 after Waleed Beshr scored the winning goal with three minutes to play.

Oman and Palestine were now left to battle it out for the third and final spot at the 2019 FIFA Beach Soccer World Cup, and, after a 2-2 draw, the game was decided from the spot, with Alaa Atiya's miss following Mushel Al Araimi's successful penalty sealing Oman's place in Paraguay.

Group A									
	P	W	W+	Wp	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Palestine	3	3	0	0	0	14	9	5	9
Malaysia	3	1	0	0	2	12	13	-1	3
Thailand	3	1	0	0	2	8	10	-2	3
Afghanistan	3	0	1	0	2	5	7	-2	2
07/03/19									
Afghanistan 3 Malaysia 2 AET									
Thailand 2 Palestine 5									
09/03/19									
Palestine 3 Afghanistan 2									
Malaysia 5 Thailand 4									
11/03/19									
Malaysia 5 Palestine 6									
Thailand 2 Afghanistan 0									

Group B									
	P	W	W+	Wp	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
UAE	3	3	0	0	0	15	5	10	9
Lebanon	3	2	0	0	1	18	8	10	6
China	3	1	0	0	2	14	14	0	3
Kyrgyz Republic	3	0	0	0	3	6	26	-20	0
07/03/19									
Lebanon 5 China 3									
UAE 6 Kyrgyz Republic 1									
09/03/19									
Kyrgyz Republic 2 Lebanon 11									
China 2 UAE 6									
11/03/19									
UAE 3 Lebanon 2									
China 9 Kyrgyz Republic 3									

Group C									
	P	W	W+	Wp	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	0	21	4	17	9
Bahrain	3	2	0	0	1	12	10	2	6
Kuwait	3	1	0	0	2	11	14	-3	3
Qatar	3	0	0	0	3	4	20	-16	0
08/03/19									
Bahrain 5 Qatar 2									
Japan 8 Kuwait 1									
10/03/19									
Kuwait 2 Bahrain 5									
Qatar 1 Japan 7									
12/03/19									
Japan 6 Bahrain 2									
Qatar 1 Kuwait 8									

Group D									
	P	W	W+	Wp	L	GF	GA	GD	Pts
Oman	2	2	0	0	0	10	6	4	6
Iran	2	1	0	0	1	8	6	2	3
Iraq	2	0	0	0	2	5	11	-6	0
08/03/19									
Iraq 2 Iran 5									
10/03/19									
Oman 6 Iraq 3									
12/03/19									
Iran 3 Oman 4									

Quarter-Finals									
14/03/19									
Oman 5 Bahrain 3									
Japan 3 Iran 2 AET									
UAE 8 Malaysia 1									
Palestine 4 Lebanon 3									

Semi-Finals									
15/03/19									
UAE 3 Oman 2									
Palestine 0 Japan 6									

Third-Place Play-Off									
17/03/19									
Palestine 2 Oman 2									
Oman win 2-1 on penalties									

Final									
17/03/19									
Japan 2 UAE 2									
Japan win 3-1 on penalties									



Cast For 2020 Finals Confirmed

The 15 teams who will join hosts Thailand at next January's AFC U23 Championship were confirmed after the qualification round was held in March.

The 11 group winners and four best-placed runners-up secured their places for a tournament that will also act as the qualification campaign for the 2020 Olympic Games in Japan.

Holders Uzbekistan will aim to defend their title after a scoreless draw with Tajikistan in Tashkent proved enough for them to top Group F, while the Tajiks and India were both eliminated.

Qatar and Oman both claimed wins over Afghanistan and Nepal in Group A before a 2-2 draw between the pair meant the Qataris advanced on goal difference as the Omanis exited.

Three wins from three saw hosts Bahrain win Group B ahead of Palestine, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, with a final-day win over the Palestinians proving crucial and ousting their West Asian rivals.

Iraq and hosts Iran secured their places at the continental tournament after following up wins over Yemen and Turkmenistan in Group C by drawing with each other, with the Iraqis topping the standings.

A similar scenario played out in Group D as hosts Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates ran out comfortable winners over Lebanon and the Maldives before drawing 1-1 as both progressed.

In Group E, Jordan and Syria claimed wins over hosts Kuwait and Kyrgyz Republic and the pair qualified after drawing their final game 1-1.

DPR Korea topped Group G ahead of Singapore, Hong Kong and Mongolia, although the Singaporeans will feel hard done by after remaining unbeaten throughout.

Korea Republic drew 2-2 with Australia to finish top of Group H, but the Australians also qualified as the best-placed runners-up. Both had earlier beaten hosts Cambodia and Chinese Taipei.

The 2016 winners Japan scored 21 goals and conceded none as they finished top of Group I following big wins over Macau, Timor-Leste and hosts Myanmar.

China's late equaliser against hosts Malaysia saw them claim a 2-2 draw to top Group J as the Malaysians exited despite earlier beating Laos and the Philippines.

Hosts Vietnam claimed successive wins over Indonesia, Brunei Darussalam and Thailand to top Group K on maximum points; Thailand, meanwhile, qualify automatically as hosts.

Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Qatar	3	2	1	0	9	2	7	7
Oman	3	2	1	0	5	3	2	7
Afghanistan	3	1	0	2	3	4	-1	3
Nepal	3	0	0	3	0	8	-8	0

22/03/19
Oman 1 Nepal 0
Qatar 2 Afghanistan 0
24/03/19
Afghanistan 1 Oman 2
Nepal 0 Qatar 5
26/03/19
Qatar 2 Oman 2
Nepal 0 Afghanistan 2

Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Bahrain	3	3	0	0	12	0	12	9
Palestine	3	2	0	1	10	2	8	6
Bangladesh	3	1	0	2	2	2	0	3
Sri Lanka	3	0	0	3	0	20	-20	0

22/03/19
Palestine 9 Sri Lanka 0
Bahrain 1 Bangladesh 0
24/03/19
Bangladesh 0 Palestine 1
Sri Lanka 0 Bahrain 9
26/03/19
Bangladesh 2 Sri Lanka 0
Palestine 0 Bahrain 2

Group C

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Iraq	3	2	1	0	7	0	7	7
Iran	3	2	1	0	6	1	5	7
Turkmenistan	3	0	1	2	1	5	-4	1
Yemen	3	0	1	2	0	8	-8	1

22/03/19
Iraq 5 Yemen 0
Iran 3 Turkmenistan 1
24/03/19
Turkmenistan 0 Iraq 2
Yemen 0 Iran 3
26/03/19
Turkmenistan 0 Yemen 0
Iraq 0 Iran 0

Group D

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
UAE	3	2	1	0	10	2	8	7
Saudi Arabia	3	2	1	0	9	1	8	7
Lebanon	3	1	0	2	7	8	-1	3
Maldives	3	0	0	3	0	15	-15	0

22/03/19
UAE 6 Lebanon 1
Saudi Arabia 6 Maldives 0
24/03/19
Maldives 0 UAE 3
Lebanon 0 Saudi Arabia 2
26/03/19
Lebanon 6 Maldives 0
Saudi Arabia 1 UAE 1

Group E

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Jordan	3	2	1	0	6	2	4	7
Syria	3	2	1	0	5	1	4	7
Kuwait	3	1	0	2	4	6	-2	3
Kyrgyz Republic	3	0	0	3	2	8	-6	0

22/03/19
Syria 2 Kyrgyz Republic 0
Jordan 2 Kuwait 1
24/03/19
Kyrgyz Republic 0 Jordan 3
Kuwait 0 Syria 2
26/03/19
Jordan 1 Syria 1
Kyrgyz Republic 2 Kuwait 3

Group F

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Uzbekistan	2	1	1	0	3	0	3	4
Tajikistan	2	1	1	0	2	0	2	4
India	2	0	0	2	0	5	-5	0

22/03/19
India 0 Uzbekistan 3
24/03/19
Tajikistan 2 India 0
26/03/19
Uzbekistan 0 Tajikistan 0

Group G

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
DPR Korea	3	2	1	0	4	1	3	7
Singapore	3	1	2	0	5	3	2	5
Hong Kong	3	1	1	1	2	3	-1	4
Mongolia	3	0	0	3	1	5	-4	0

22/03/19
Hong Kong 1 Singapore 1
DPR Korea 1 Mongolia 0
24/03/19
Singapore 1 DPR Korea 1
Mongolia 0 Hong Kong 1
26/03/19
DPR Korea 2 Hong Kong 0
Singapore 3 Mongolia 1

Group H

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Korea Republic	3	2	1	0	16	3	13	7
Australia	3	2	1	0	14	2	12	7
Cambodia	3	0	1	2	2	13	-11	1
Chinese Taipei	3	0	1	2	1	15	-14	1

22/03/19
Korea Republic 8 Chinese Taipei 0
Australia 6 Cambodia 0
24/03/19
Chinese Taipei 0 Australia 6
Cambodia 1 Korea Republic 6
26/03/19
Korea Republic 2 Australia 2
Cambodia 1 Chinese Taipei 1

Group I

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	21	0	21	9
Myanmar	3	2	0	1	11	7	4	6
Timor-Leste	3	1	0	2	5	16	-11	3
Macau	3	0	0	3	3	17	-14	0

22/03/19
Japan 8 Macau 0
Myanmar 7 Timor-Leste 0
24/03/19
Timor-Leste 0 Japan 6
Macau 0 Myanmar 4
26/03/19
Timor-Leste 5 Macau 3
Japan 7 Myanmar 0

Group J

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
China	3	2	1	0	15	2	13	7
Malaysia	3	2	1	0	6	2	4	7
Laos	3	1	0	2	3	8	-5	3
Philippines	3	0	0	3	2	14	-12	0

22/03/19
China 5 Laos 0
Malaysia 3 Philippines 0
24/03/19
Philippines 0 China 8
Laos 0 Malaysia 1
26/03/19
Laos 3 Philippines 2
Malaysia 2 China 2

Group K

	P	W	D	L	F	A	+/-	Pts
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AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 Most Engaging In History

The AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 engaged with more fans than ever before as more than 836.6 million fans interacted through the tournament's digital platforms, shattering the record set in the 2015 edition in Australia and nearly doubling the 434 million TV viewership for that competition.

The astonishing impact of the biggest AFC Asian Cup ever was felt across all social platforms with the AFC Asian Cup Facebook page reaching 169.4 million impressions, a staggering increase of more than fifteen times from the 11 million reach four years ago.

Adding to this, fans also made their voices heard on Twitter, which received over 106.5 million impressions compared to three million in the last edition.

The biggest rise, however, was felt on the tournament's

official Instagram account, which garnered an astonishing reach of nearly 132.4 million compared to the one million engaged in Australia, as another 52.8 million impressions were garnered on Instagram stories.

Meanwhile, the-AFC.com, which was exclusively remodeled for the competition one month before kick-off in the UAE, was a one-stop hub for fans and media alike, receiving over 30.9 million page views, or 100 percent more than the 15 million from Australia 2015.

The 28-day tournament was also a great success on YouTube with viewers tuning in to notch-up 42.5 million minutes of viewed action. Asia's crown jewel was also a hit in China PR as the AFC's ever-expanding Weibo platform reached over 50 million impressions.



29th AFC Congress Concludes In Kuala Lumpur

The 29th Asian Football Confederation (AFC) Congress concluded on April 6 with AFC President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa (Bahrain) re-elected unopposed for a second four-year term (2019-2023) at the helm of a new-look AFC Executive Committee. The full (re) election results for the 29th AFC Congress are as follows:

AFC President and FIFA Vice President:
H.E. Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa (Bahrain)

FIFA Council:
H.E. Du Zhaocai (China PR)
Mr. Praful Patel (India)
Mr. Kohzo Tashima (Japan)
Mr. Mariano V. Araneta, Jr. (Philippines)
Mr. Saoud A. Aziz M A Al-Mohannadi (Qatar)

Female Member:
Ms. Mahfuza Akhter Kiron (Bangladesh)

AFC Vice Presidents:
West Zone
Mr. Saoud A. Aziz M A Al-Mohannadi (Qatar)

Central Zone
Mr. Mehdi Taj (Islamic Republic of Iran)

South Zone
Mr. Makhdoom Syed Faisal Saleh Hayat (Pakistan)

ASEAN Zone
Mr. Zaw Zaw (Myanmar)

East Zone
Mr. Ganbaatar Amgalanbaatar (Mongolia)

Female representatives on AFC Executive Committee:

West Zone
Ms. Susan R. A. Alshalabi (Palestine)

South Zone
Ms. Mahfuza Akhter Kiron (Bangladesh)

ASEAN Zone
Ms. Kanya Keomany (Laos)

East Zone
Ms. Han Un Gyong (DPR Korea)

Central Zone
(To be contested at a later date)

AFC Executive Committee members:

West Zone
Mr. Abed-Alkhalig Masoud Ahmed (Iraq)
Mr Hachem Haider (Lebanon)
Mr. Salem Said Salem Al Wahaibi (Oman)
Dr Hamid Mohammed Ali Al-Shaibani (Yemen)

Central Zone
Mr. Sayed Ali Reza Aghazada (Afghanistan)

South Zone
Mr. Dasho Ugen Tsechup Dorji (Bhutan)

ASEAN Zone
Mr. Chris Nikou (Australia)
Dato' Haji Hamidin Bin Haji Mohd Amin (Malaysia)
Dr. Tran Quoc Tuan (Vietnam)

East Zone
Mr Fok Kai Shan Eric (Hong Kong)

AFC Ups Fight Against Intellectual Property Theft

The Asian Football Confederation is increasing its fight against Intellectual Property (IP) theft by appointing experts to continue to protect the AFC's broadcast and commercial partners rights.

In recent months, the AFC has acted as part of a coalition against the pirate broadcasters 'beoutQ' and against those who attempted to 'ambush' marketing rights at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 held in January.

Now to further strengthen the AFC's stance against IP theft, the Confederation is to engage market leaders in this field with a view to further combatting the escalating risk.

Dato' Windsor John, the AFC General Secretary, said: "The AFC values its broadcast and commercial partners and wishes to do everything that it can to protect their rights, so we see

this as a logical next step.

"In recent months the AFC has been involved in a coalition of leading international rights holders, such as FIFA and UEFA as well as some of the top leagues in the world – particularly in the battle over broadcast rights in the MENA region.

"But the question of IP theft runs much wider than just MENA and the AFC prides itself on best practices and good governance, and now we are beginning the process of obtaining expert advice on what measures we can take to ensure we remain as leaders in this area."

The AFC has already identified some key experts in the protection of IP but will continue to search to ensure that the advice it receives is of the highest possible quality.



AFC President Praises Vietnam Football Federation

The Asian Football Confederation President Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa met Le Khanh Hai, the President of the Vietnam Football Federation (VFF) and Vice-President Dr Tran Quoc Tuan at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur in early March.

It was Khanh Hai's first visit to the AFC headquarters since becoming President of the VFF last December.

The AFC President congratulated Khanh Hai for Vietnam's successes, especially after an outstanding 2018 which saw the Southeast Asian nation excelling at various levels. That form was continued into the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 where Vietnam reached the quarter-finals.

Shaikh Salman also expressed his gratitude for the close relationship the VFF has with the AFC, which has helped the sport's progress on the Continent. He said: "The VFF is a stable organisation with excellent governance standards and unity of purpose and this has contributed to their success."

The AFC President also shared with the VFF delegation the initiatives and projects that have been implemented under the AFC Vision and Mission.

Khanh Hai congratulated Shaikh Salman for the

progress the AFC has made over the last six years and assured the VFF's continued support.

In thanking the AFC President for the assistance that has been extended to the VFF, Khanh Hai also sought Shaikh Salman's further support for the continued development of football at every level in Vietnam.



Sixth AFC Medical Conference Held In Chengdu

The sixth Asian Football Confederation Medical Conference was held over three days in the Chinese city of Chengdu in early March.

With the aim of achieving football excellence through evidence-based sports science and medicine, the prestigious event was attended by more than 700 delegates and featured an agenda of lectures, symposiums and free papers amid a backdrop of knowledge and information exchange.

AFC Competitions Director, Shin Man Gil, hailed the success of the conference, saying: "Firstly, I must convey the AFC's heartfelt appreciation to the Chinese Football Association, the Chengdu FA and the Chengdu City Government for hosting this conference in your wonderful country."

"With more than 700 delegates, this was the largest-ever conference since its inception in 1995, and I would

like to congratulate and thank every one of you for helping us reach this historical feat.

"The growth of this conference is a heartening indication of the greater emphasis we are placing, as one Asian football family, in the area of sport science and medicine.

"The wellbeing and care of players is increasingly becoming more complex and demanding. And against the backdrop of the Asian continent, the diversity, the sheer size, these challenges appear even more demanding than ever.

"Looking back, I am sure you will agree that this year's theme – "Football and Sports Medicine: The Challenging Horizon" was a timely opportunity for you all."

The AFC's Medical Committee has also recommended that the Medical Conference should, from 2022, be held every two years instead of its current four-year cycle.



2nd AFC National Coaches Conference Held

Shaikh Salman bin Ebrahim Al Khalifa, the Asian Football Confederation President, raised the curtain on the 2nd AFC National Coaches Conference, held in Kuala Lumpur in March.

The three-day conference started with Shaikh Salman, alongside Asia's national team coaches and technical directors, paying tribute to Qatar for their impressive victory at the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019 in February.

Shaikh Salman said: "I can understand what kind of burden the head coaches and technical directors carry on their shoulders. They have a big responsibility and it is a vast area, so it is important that we learn from the AFC Asian Cup and FIFA World Cup.

"We saw a record number of Asian teams in a FIFA World Cup Finals and in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019,

there was an increase from 16 to 24 teams and I believe everyone here can agree that it was a good thing. We watched many different teams do well, especially Qatar.

"Qatar has a young team and they have a strong foundation. Now they will play in the FIFA World Cup Qatar in 2022 as the Asian champions. It is important for everyone to discuss and learn from this conference which will hopefully help us close the gap

between us and the world's best."

Among the head coaches who attended the conference were Félix Sánchez of Qatar and Hajime Moriyasu of Japan, who finished runners-up in the AFC Asian Cup UAE 2019, while former Korea Republic captain Park Ji-sung was among the key speakers in the conference.



AFC Grassroots Charter Bronze For Laos & Lebanon

The Laos Football Federation (LFF) and the Lebanon Football Association (LFA) were awarded with the AFC Grassroots Charter Bronze category membership in mid-February.

In the past year, the LFF has placed great emphasis on grassroots development through various activities, enriching the lives of over 1,600 children throughout the Southeast Asian country.

Programmes such as the LFF Out Reach, MA Holiday Course and MA Grassroots Football are in place with the Laos Ministry of Education and Sports & Provisional Department of Education as its main partners.

LFF's programmes also cover a wide range of endeavors for disadvantaged groups, coach education, funding and facilities for grassroots activities.

Lebanon's dedication to bringing the level of grassroots development up another level has been clear with

programmes that have involved over 24,850 players.

On top of a strong administrative team of eight staff led by Grassroots Manager Firas Majed, they have recorded several achievements.

One of which is the four-year plan for coaching licenses, with the aim of giving quality training to participants.

The inclusion of the women's objective to ensure participation in AFC tournaments witnessed success in the recent 2019 AFC U-19 Championship Qualifiers, where Lebanon reached the second round as group runners-up.

LFA's development plans are further strengthened with support from the Lebanon Ministry of

Education, as well as from local municipalities and clubs.

Their commitment towards social responsibility has also been impressive, as LFA advocates for Palestinian and Syrian refugees by working with various Non-Governmental Organisations.



AFC Youth Panel Meets For Seventh Time

The Asian Football Confederation Youth Panel pledged to continue the promotion and development of Elite Youth Football in Asia

following their seventh meeting at AFC House in Kuala Lumpur in mid-March.

The 14-member panel and AFC Technical Director Andy Roxburgh, who led the meeting, discussed a range of key topics focusing on developing young players in Asia.

"This panel is responsible for elite youth development for boys and girls. If you don't promote youth football, teams won't make it at the top level," said Roxburgh.

"Qatar is a good example as Felix Sanchez, their national coach, was involved in the youth development and as you know, they won the AFC Asian Cup UAE

2019."

Among the important issues highlighted was an update on the AFC Elite Youth Scheme and how the Scheme can be improved and promoted to the AFC's Member Associations (MAs).

The AFC Elite Youth Team Scheme is an important step in talent development that will help MAs to further develop their youth programmes.

To enhance the standards of elite player development, the Asian Football Confederation's Youth Scheme has highlighted a number

of criteria that are necessary for the education of talented players – many of whom will become future international players.



Karbala International Stadium

Karbala, Iraq

The state-of-the-art Karbala International Stadium is located in the city of Karbala, around 100 kilometres from the Iraqi capital, Baghdad. Construction on the venue began in 2013 and the stadium officially opened on May 12, 2016, when it hosted a match between local side Karbala FC and Iraq's 2007 AFC Asian Cup-winning team. Boasting a capacity of 30,000 with a roof

covering the seated area, the stadium is Iraq's newest high-quality sporting venue and is regularly used for matches involving both club and country. After international football returned to Iraq in mid-2017, Karbala International Stadium became the second venue to host the Lions of Mesopotamia when a packed arena saw Iraq draw with Syria in November that year. The following year Baghdad sides Air Force Club and Al Zawraa hosted AFC Cup games at Karbala International Stadium as clubs

from outside of Iraq returned for continental action for the first time since 2013. Then in March 2019 the stadium became the first in Iraq to stage an AFC Champions League game when Al Zawraa delighted the near capacity-filled venue by posting a 5-0 victory over the United Arab Emirates' Al Wasl. Karbala remains one of just three cities in Iraq where international and continental football is currently allowed to be played – the others being Basra and Arbil.



A full-page photograph of Saki Kumagai, a Japanese footballer, in action. She is wearing a white Lyon jersey with blue and red vertical stripes, the Adidas logo, and the ENGIE sponsor. She is dribbling a black and white Adidas football with her right foot. The background is a blurred stadium with spectators.

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**“The thought
of being able
to win the
[FIFA Women’s
World Cup]
title in Lyon
is certainly a
motivating
factor.”**

Saki Kumagai
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